DECEMBER

10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

THE LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE

THE GUN-PACK RUNS TONIGHT!

NOVELETTE OF A LOST LAWMAN

by HARRY F. OLMSTED

★

GRAY WOOL BRINGS GUNSMOKE!

POWERFUL RANGE-WAR NOVEL

by WALT COBURN

CASSIDY ★ FOREMAN ★ *AND OTHER FAMOUS WESTERN AUTHORS!*

DECEMBER 10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE 10¢

Give Jewelry THIS CHRISTMAS

$1.00 DELIVERS Your SELECTION

10 MONTHS to PAY

HOW TO ORDER! It's easy to give a quality gift of genuine jewelry — or a fine watch for Christmas! Buy your gifts as thousands do — **on Royal's Easy Payment Plan. Just send $1.00 deposit,** your name, address and, in confidence, a few facts about yourself such as age, occupation, etc. Shipment comes to you prepaid for **TEN DAYS TRIAL.** No C. O. D. to pay on arrival.

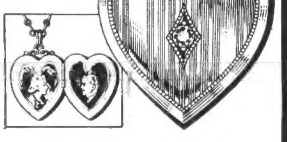
Absolute Satisfaction Guaranteed. If entirely pleased, pay small amount stated each month for **TEN MONTHS.** Otherwise, return selection and we promptly refund your $1.00 deposit.

Our forty-four year reputation stands squarely behind every transaction. Written guarantee accompanies every Diamond or Watch. Place your order NOW! TODAY! and avoid the "Christmas rush."

Diamond-Set LOCKET

Only $15.95

$1.50 a month



HA-1 . . . Dainty, heart-shaped, 10K Yellow Gold, secret photo locket; exact size shown. Richly engraved, set with a genuine diamond. Holds 2 photos. Complete with 10K Yellow Gold chain. **$15.95 — only $1.00 down — $1.50 a month.**

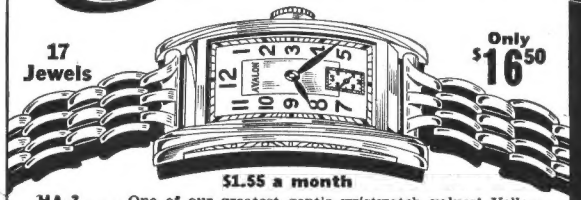
GENT'S INITIAL RING

Only $16.50

$1.55 a month

HA-2 . . . Gent's handsome Initial Ring in 10K Yellow Gold. Genuine black Onyx set with a genuine diamond and 2 raised white gold initials. Specify initials desired. **$16.50 — only $1.00 down — $1.55 a month.**

17 Jewels — Only $16.50



$1.55 a month

HA-3 . . . One of our greatest gent's wristwatch values! Yellow Rolled Gold Plate case with stainless steel back neatly curved for wearing comfort. 17 Jewel fully guaranteed movement. Matched link bracelet. **$16.50 — only $1.00 down — $1.55 a month.**

Special "Schick" TRADE-IN Deal — $2.75 allowed for any old razor

Reg. 12.50
Less 2.75
Now 9.75

Send $1.00 with your order, send "trade-in" later.

HA-4 . . . Famous SCHICK Electric Shaver. Shaves cleanly — smoothly. No lather or blades. No nicks — no cuts. Operates on standard AC-DC house current. "Schick Captain" model (black) complete with case and cord. **Order before Nov. 15th on "trade-in" deal.** Just send $1.00 now. Don't send your old razor until after you've tried your new SCHICK. Then send old razor to us for $2.75 allowance, leaving only $8.75 to pay — **$1.00 a mo.**

After Nov. 15th price returns to $12.50. $1 down — $1.15 a mo.

6 Diamond BRIDAL ENSEMBLE

Both Rings Only $29.75

$2.87 a month

Illustration enlarged to show detail

HA-5 . . . TWO exquisitely designed, expertly matched rings of 14K Yellow Gold. Engagement Ring set with a fine quality, genuine diamond and 2 side diamonds. Three matched diamonds adorn the Wedding Ring. A really Great Diamond Value. **BOTH for $29.75 — Only $1.00 down — $2.87 a month.**

If Purchased Separately

HA-5A . . . Engagement Ring only **$19.75; $1.00 down — $1.88 a month.**

HA-5B . . . Wedding Ring only **$12.50; $1.00 — $1.15 a mo.**

17 Jewels — 2 Genuine DIAMONDS — Only $19.75

Only $1.88 a Month

HA-6 . . . A stunning new ladies' wristwatch in the newest and most popular design. Richly engraved Yellow Rolled Gold Plate case set with 2 Genuine Diamonds. Special non-corrosive steel back. Fully guaranteed accurate and dependable 17 Jewel movement. Complete with fashionable link bracelet. **$19.75 — only $1.00 down — $1.88 a month.**

"LADY BULOVA" 17 Jewel $29.75

$2.88 a month

HA-7 . . . BULOVA'S most popular ladies' model. Daintily designed case of Yellow Rolled Gold Plate, 17 Jewel BULOVA "radio-time" movement. Silk cord bracelet. **$29.75 — only $1.00 down — $2.88 a month.**

HA-7A . . . **"Lady Bulova"** 17 Jewels; *engraved* Yellow Rolled Gold Plate case; *link bracelet* to match. **$33.75 — only $1.00 down $3.27 a month**

Only $24.75 $2.37 a month — 15 Jewel BULOVA "Dean"

HA-8 . . . Streamlined Yellow Rolled Gold Plate case, shaped to the wrist. 15 Jewel BULOVA movement. Complete with matched link bracelet, it's a great BULOVA value at **$24.75 — only $1.00 down — $2.37 a month.**

America's Largest Mail Order Credit Jewelers

FREE CATALOG

ADULTS—Send for your copy of new "BOOK OF GEMS"—featuring DIAMONDS, WATCHES, SILVERWARE, CAMERAS, GIFTS. TEN MONTHS TO PAY ON EVERYTHING at standard cash prices. Write today.

ROYAL DIAMOND & WATCH CO. Inc.

Established 1895

Address - DEPT. 150-C — 24 West 40TH St. NEW YORK

Make Big Cash Profits SELLING FOODS Right in Your Own Neighborhood

Here's your big chance! Everybody must buy food. Now you can have a fascinating, simple-to-run, home-owned business with a wonderful opportunity to make good money at once and all year 'round. Or, if you just want some extra money you can turn a few hours of your time each week into cash to help you buy clothes, or pay off your home, educate your children, or enjoy luxuries you've always longed to have.

Just send me your name and I'll mail to you—without obligation—complete details of this amazingly successful, interesting and highly profitable Plan—and tell you all about my Free Outfit Offer.

Great Opportunity for Men and Women

The astounding, nation-wide success of this Plan is due to the powerful and instant appeal of good things to eat! There's scarcely a man, woman or child who doesn't love deliciously tempting pies, biscuits, puddings and other food delights. Wouldn't you like to turn this universal appeal into cash for yourself? Wouldn't you like exclusive rights to all the profits waiting to be made in your locality on an extensive, nationally-famous line of ready-mixed preparations that make marvelously appetizing dishes in a jiffy?

In addition to foods, this nationally known line includes over 100 other quick selling, steady repeating home necessities. This big line is manufactured in our own Pure Food Kitchens and Laboratories, under the supervision of skilled chefs, chemists and dieticians. Every single product is of uniform high quality and carries with it our absolute guarantee of satisfaction or money back. Besides the money you make—you can save money by getting home necessities for your own use at wholesale prices.

Complete Outfit FREE!

Now, without your paying me one single penny, you can have everything you need to prove to yourself the thrill and profit of running a simple dignified business of your own. I will give complete, valuable business equipment—FREE—to one realiable man or woman in each open locality. This Free Money-Making Outfit contains a large assortment of regular full-size packages of the most popular, fastest selling products in the line; a simple, sure-fire Plan that anyone can follow; samples to give away; a big, beautiful catalog of the entire line; and everything else needed to start making money at once.

Get Full Particulars NOW!

You owe it to yourself to write and see what wonderful success other men and women have enjoyed with this money-making Plan. No experience is required. Mail the coupon or a postcard at once for my complete, amazingly interesting Plan and my Free Outfit Offer. Do it TODAY!

Mr. E. J. Mills,
8067 Monmouth Ave.,
Cincinnati, Ohio

RUSH COUPON for FREE OFFER

Mr. E. J. Mills,
8067 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

Please send me at once full particulars about your Free Outfit Offer and how you will help me make big cash profits as a Local Distributor for your nationally famous products.

Name.....

Address.....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

★ LOOK FOR THE BIG 7TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE—ON SALE DECEMBER 1ST! ★

10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

THE WORLD'S LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE

VOLUME XXV DECEMBER, 1939 NUMBER 4

Complete Western Novel

Gray Wool Brings Gunsmoke!.....Walt Coburn 8
God help any stranger who, like Morgan MacLeod, rode blindly into bloody Hondo Basin, where men shot from the brush first and talked afterward—in the wild and ruthless terror of a range gone mad with war!

Three Complete Western Novelettes

The Gun-Pack Runs Tonight!.....Harry F. Olmsted 50
A loyal deputy, Dan Baylor was willing to die for his sheriff boss. He won that chance when he followed the old lawman's advice: "Use your heart as well as your guns!"

Apprenticed to the Owlhoot.....Herbert A. Woodbury 76
Jim Vance, kid outlaw, believed with all his soul that there's honor among thieves . . . Until, mortgaged to the legion of the damned, he found himself bearing destruction and heartbreak to his last friends on that bleak, death-scourged range.

Wild Feudists of Hat Peak Range.....Cliff Farrell. 102
Only a marriage between the fighting McQueens and the Black Bassiters could bring truce to the Hat Peak cow-country . . . But wilful Honey McQueen had no intention sacrificing her pride, so that honest cowmen neighbors might live in peace!

Three Western Short Stories

Hell On the Hoof.....L. L. Foreman 39
Sometimes a bronc-twister will risk his neck on a killer bronc just for the roar of the crowd . . . And sometimes, like young Pinto, for the life of a saddle-mate!

Cattle King's Ultimatum.....Kenneth A. Fowler 67
One stubborn sod-buster decided he'd drifted far enough—and neither Harbold's deadly gun nor flaming torch could change his mind!

Boots and Saddles for Tensleep!.....Bart Cassidy 92
The same hard-riding frontier troopers who pounded his backtrail offered Tensleep Maxon one last chance for the lives of a hundred embattled nester families!

—And—

A Pledge Renewed.....The Editors 4
—after seven years of leading the way in Western fiction.

Frontiersmen Who Made History.....Cedric W. Windas 7
Texas pioneer cowman, Oliver Loving first blazed the thundering cattle trails. . . .

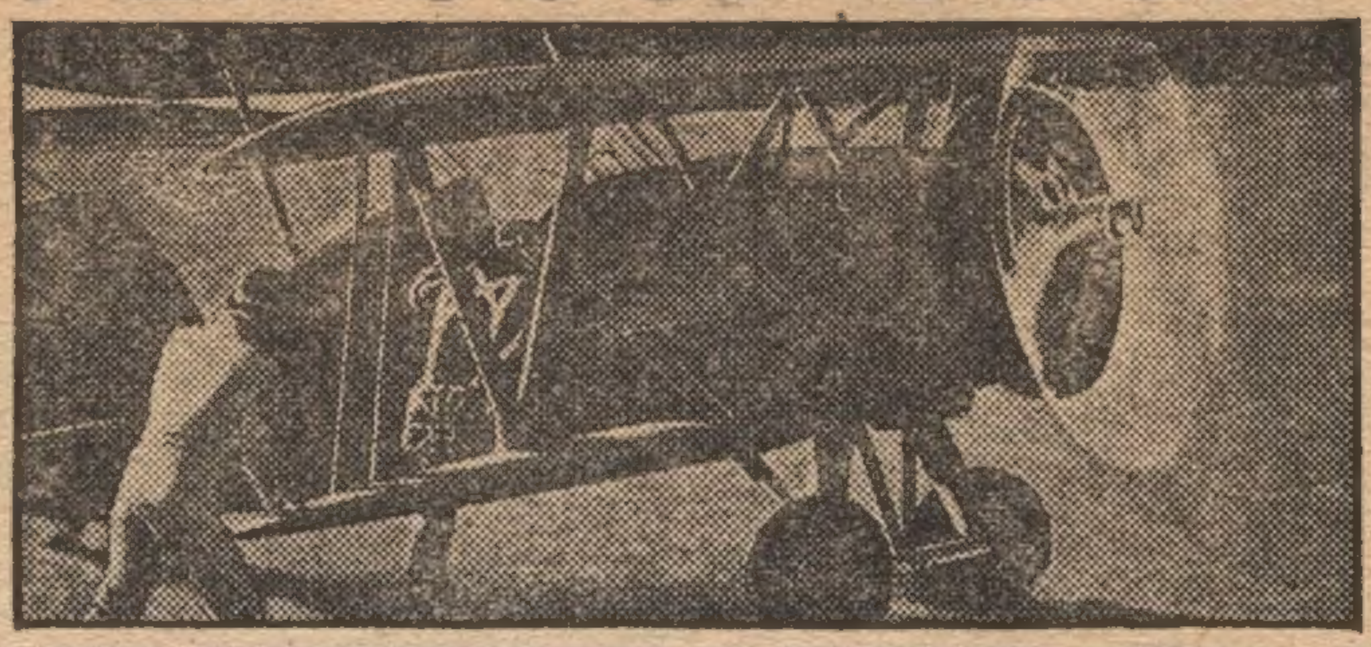
In the Saddle.....A Department 120
Where readers, writers and editors light down and swap talk. . . .

ALL STORIES NEW **NO REPRINTS!**

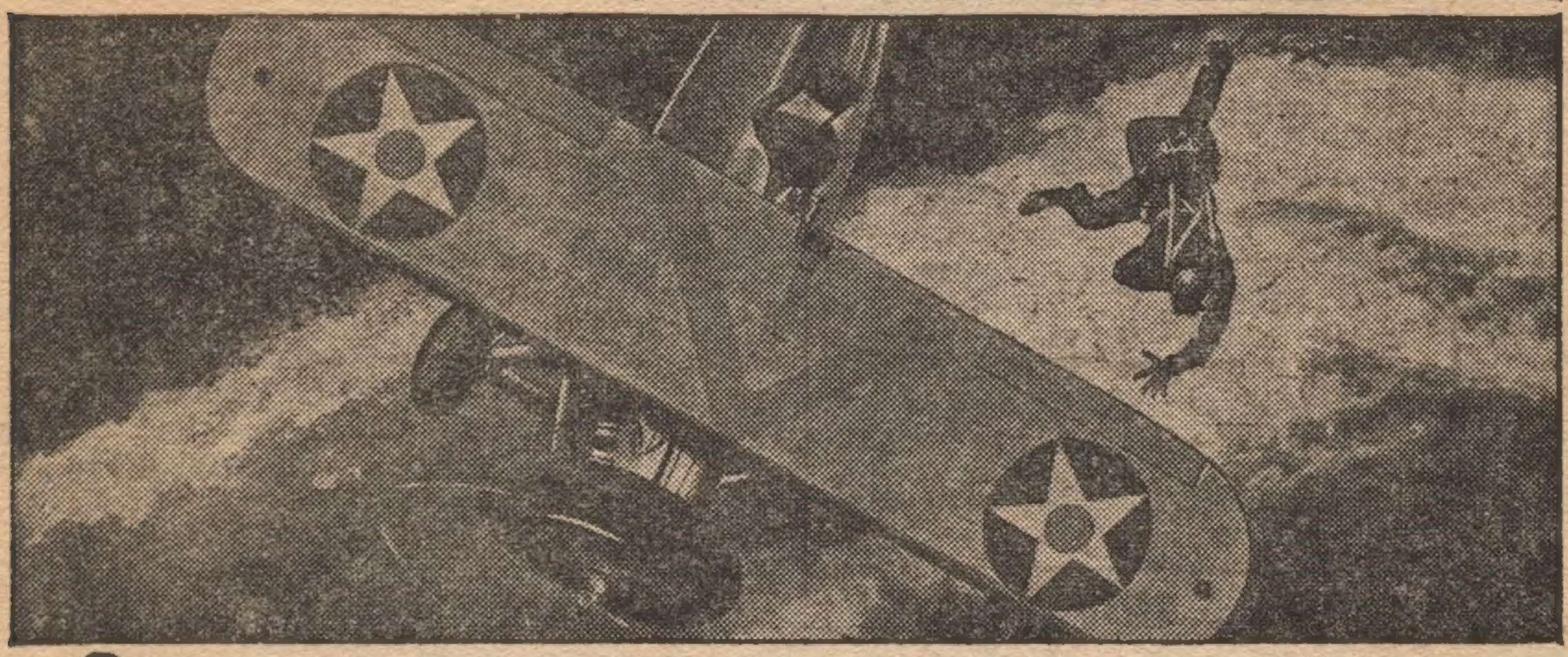
Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter November 30, 1935, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1939 by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.20. **Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd St., New York City.** For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, kindly enclose stamped, self-addressed envelopes for their return if found unavailable and send them to 205 East 42nd St., New York City. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. **Printed in U. S. A.**

"I HAD TO BAIL OUT IN A PEA SOUP FOG!"

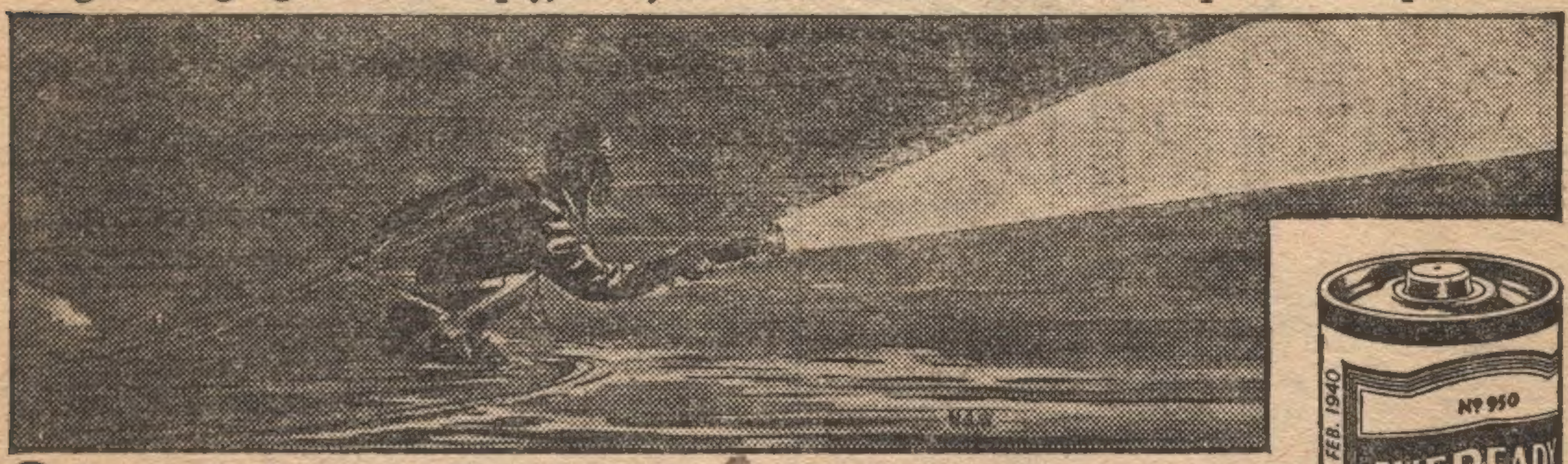
C. W. HARBERT
Aviation Cadet
Bristol, W. Va.



1 "I took off from Pensacola on a night training flight in my single-seater fighting plane," writes Cadet Harbert. "Later, as I started homeward, a heavy fog rolled in. The landing field was blotted out!



2 "It was too dangerous—for myself and those below—to attempt a landing. I had to bail out in that pea soup fog! Heading for open country, I circled at 5,000 feet until the gasoline gauge showed empty, then jammed the stick forward and catapulted into space!



3 "I landed waist-deep in the wide mouth of a river. Marooned by deep water on all sides, I grabbed my flashlight, and—despite the soaking—it worked! Guided by its beam, two fishermen eventually found and rescued me—thanks to 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries—which you can depend on in emergencies!

(*Signed*) Guy Harbert"

FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... *Look for the* DATE-LINE

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC., 30 EAST 42nd STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.
Unit of Union Carbide UCC *and Carbon Corporation*

MIDWEST FACTORY-TO-YOU
20th ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL!

WITH TELEVISION ADAPTATION

Here's today's biggest radio value—the 1940 TELEVISION-ADAPTED Midwest—at sensationally low factory-to-you-price. Now enjoy exciting foreign reception. Absolute satisfaction guaranteed on money-back basis. Send 1c postcard for FREE 1940 catalog.

(User-agents make easy extra money!)

See Midwest's Answer to TRADE-INS!

PUT THIS 1940 14 TUBE CHASSIS IN YOUR PRESENT CABINET

$19.95

COMPLETE CHASSIS WITH TUBES AND SPEAKER

14 TUBE CONSOLE $29.95 COMPLETE

SAVE UP TO 50%

30 DAYS TRIAL

EASY PAY PLAN

MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION

DEPT. 98-C CINCINNATI, OHIO

START
$1260 to $2100 YEAR

Thousands Appointments each year

Get Ready Now
For 1940 Examinations

MEN—WOMEN

Short Hours
Dependable jobs
Mail Coupon Today—
SURE

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. S174
Rochester, N. Y.

Gentlemen: Rush to me FREE of charge, list of U. S. Government big pay jobs. Send me FREE 32-page book describing salaries, vacations, hours, work, and full particulars telling how to qualify for one of these jobs.

Name.....

Address.....

A PLEDGE RENEWED

IN THE next issue, we're having a celebration in honor of you—the readers. The occasion is the seventh big year of *Dime Western.*

From Volume 1, Number 1, we've wanted you to feel that this is your own magazine of the West. We believe we've lived up to our promise to give you the smashing stories of the grand old days of the frontier that you want. Our authors are continuing to set each month, new high marks in quality Western fiction. That was according to our plan when we determined, seven years ago, to put out the best Western fiction, effort and money could produce.

We had—and still have—certain uncompromising standards. We insisted on a new kind of Western story—one that had more than mere mention of sagebrush for Western "color," one that was about people you could know—stories which presented vigorously and with actual life the great legion who rode and fought to win an untamed country.

We insisted, moreover, on variety, on making a magazine which would bring back the broad, sweeping panorama of every phase of frontier life, from the honkatonk gambling dive of some false-front boomtown to the limitless miles of prairie, the grimly forbidding malpai.

And above all, we wanted heart-stirring, blood-quickening human drama!

In other words, we were planning *Dime Western* to be a *different* kind of Western magazine —one that published extra-value exciting fiction at a price below any other in its field.

People said it couldn't be done. "No use in trying to give readers something new or better," they told us.

But we took our gamble that readers of Western fiction knew good yarns when they read them. That we were right—and that you as readers, knew what you wanted—is attested by the thousands of letters that come to this office, many praising the magazine, many offering constructive comment. And by the fact that *Dime Western* from its very first issue has shown a healthy inclination to grow—despite the worst financial and business depression this country has ever seen. Then, four years ago it became —just as we tell everyone on the cover—"The Leading Western Magazine," outstripping all others! It has held to that leadership.

We realize that our own part is relatively small in making this magazine what it is. The authors' part is larger. But you are the ones who really deserve the credit for *Dime Western's* continual growth. So to celebrate, we're giving you, next month, what we believe is the best story-for-story issue we've ever put out!

We suggest that you stop by your newsstand and reserve your copy of the big January issue today, for it may be difficult to buy a copy if you wait. It's your issue—just as every issue of this magazine has been from the first. And we renew our pledge to you—made seven years ago —to continue to give you the extra-value kind of story which brings you the life and breath of the old West!

See you again on December 1st!

—THE EDITORS.

BUT JIM. I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY ON YOUR LOW PAY
MARY'S RIGHT. I HAVE NO RIGHT TO ASK HER TO MARRY ME ON THE MONEY I'M MAKING
LOOK HERE. N.R.I. HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF MEN LIKE ME TO MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I GUESS I'LL GET THAT FREE BOOK
LEARNING RADIO THIS WAY IS ACTUALLY FUN. I'M ALREADY MAKING $5 TO $10 A WEEK IN SPARE TIME. RADIO CERTAINLY OFFERS OPPORTUNITY TO WELL TRAINED TECHNICIANS
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THANKS. YOU SEE, I HAVE TAKEN N.R.I. TRAINING
OH JIM. IT'S WONDERFUL. NOW YOU'RE ON THE WAY TO SUCCESS
YES MARY, AND THERE'S A REAL FUTURE FOR US IN RADIO AND TELEVISION

I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

"When I completed 20 lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC, where I am now Chief Operator."

HOLLIS F. HAYES
327 Madison St.
Lapeer, Michigan.

Service Manager for Four Stores

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N.R.I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M——— Furniture Co. for their four stores."

JAMES E. RYAN
1543 Slade St.
Fall River, Mass.

Over $1,000 Before Graduating

"Before completing half the N.R.I Course I was servicing sets, and I made $1,000 to $1,200 before graduating. I am doing Radio service work for myself now."

ASHLEY G. ALDRIDGE
1228 Shepherd St.
Petersburg, Va.

$200 to $300 a Month in Own Business

"For the last two years I have been in business for myself making between $200 and $300 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N.R.I. to thank for my start in this field."

ARLIE J. FROEHNER
300 W. Texas Ave.
Goose Creek, Texas

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME
in your spare time for a
GOOD JOB IN RADIO

RADIO is a young, growing field with a future, offering many good pay spare time and full time job opportunities. And you don't have to give up your present job to become a Radio Technician. I train you right at home in your spare time.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and service men. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, Commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N.R.I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

Many Make $5, $10 a Week Extra In Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions which have helped many make $200 to $500 a year in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute Established 25 Years

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my course in Radio and Television; shows many letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in envelope, or paste on postcard.

J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. 9NS9, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

Mail this to get 64 page book FREE

THIS BOOK has shown hundreds how to MAKE MORE MONEY

J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. 9NS9, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Send me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out Radio's opportunities and tells how you train men at home to be Radio Technicians. (Write Plainly.)

NAME..... AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....

Harry F. Olmsted tells the story in—

THE DEVIL BIDS FOR A GUNMAN

Also "Johnny Bates Adopts a War," by Charles W. Tyler, featuring the brand-hawk, Johnny Bates, and his hard-fighting partner, Sunset; "Death to Seven Up Neighbors," a strong cattleland novel by Cliff Farrell; "Outcast in Search of a Brand," by John G. Pearsol, plus two other thrilling, full-length Western dramas by Larry A. Harris and L. Ernenwein!

Here's a "must" for lovers of the old frontier who glory in the thrilling drama of the men and women who fought to win the untamed wilderness.

7—SMASHING NOVELS—7

You won't want to miss these seven great Western novels, by seven popularity-proved Western writers! Ride with Vince Cardwell, outcast, as he goes back to the range which damned him to a prison hell—where, to save the girl he loves, he must sell his birthright and honor for Judas gold!

STAR WESTERN

ALL STORIES NEW ALL STORIES COMPLETE

Reserve it at your newsstand—Big December Issue on Sale November 3rd!

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

MAN-ACTION!

It's because all the color and hard-riding excitement of the untamed West are brought to life in its pages that *.44 Western Magazine* has risen to such outstanding popularity.

If you like salty, man-action fiction that's different, get the December issue—now on your newsstand.

It features:

BOOTHILL'S BULLET BRIGADE

Gripping novel of die-hard cowmen by L. Ernenwein

10¢ .44 Western MAGAZINE

On sale now

Plus these other stories:

Homestead In Hell, by Kenneth A. Fowler; Range-Busting Cowman, by John G. Pearsol; Gold Mine—On the Dodge, by Arthur Alan; Nursery Rhyme In Gunsmoke, by Jack Bloodhart; Satan Sends A Gambling Man, by Rolland Lynch; One Bullet Per Outlaw, by George Bolds; That's Why Killers Were Born, by Gunnison Steele. And many popular features!

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

From the notebook of Cedric W. Windas

• OLIVER LOVING •

(1) Born of pioneer people in the State of Kentucky, in 1813, Oliver Loving was a typical pioneer cowboy. Honest, courageous and resourceful, he gallops into this picture (and into Texas) in 1845, moulding that savage wilderness into profitable cattle country. Proclaimed a "square-shooter" by his friends, and a "straight-shooter" by the outlaws he helped suppress, he established himself in what is still known as Loving's Valley.

(2) In 1860 he drove the first herd of Texas cattle ever to reach Colorado Territory. In 1863, when his family (he had a Loving wife and nine little Loving ones) were driven from home by marauding Indians, Loving took "time out" from supplying Confederate troops with beef, to remonstrate with the ruthless redskins. Those who listened to reason he sent to their tepees. Those who didn't, he sent to their Happy Hunting Grounds.

(3) Shortly after North and South had decided that the good neighbor policy was more comfortable than conflict, Loving and Charlie Goodnight pooled herds, collecting from Uncle Sam for meat delivered on the hoof at Indian Reservations. In 1867 they determined to repeat the process, this time to faraway Fort Sumner N.M. It appears that one Bill Wilson had the same bright idea, and him they found, with his herd, on the Brazos, pushing westward

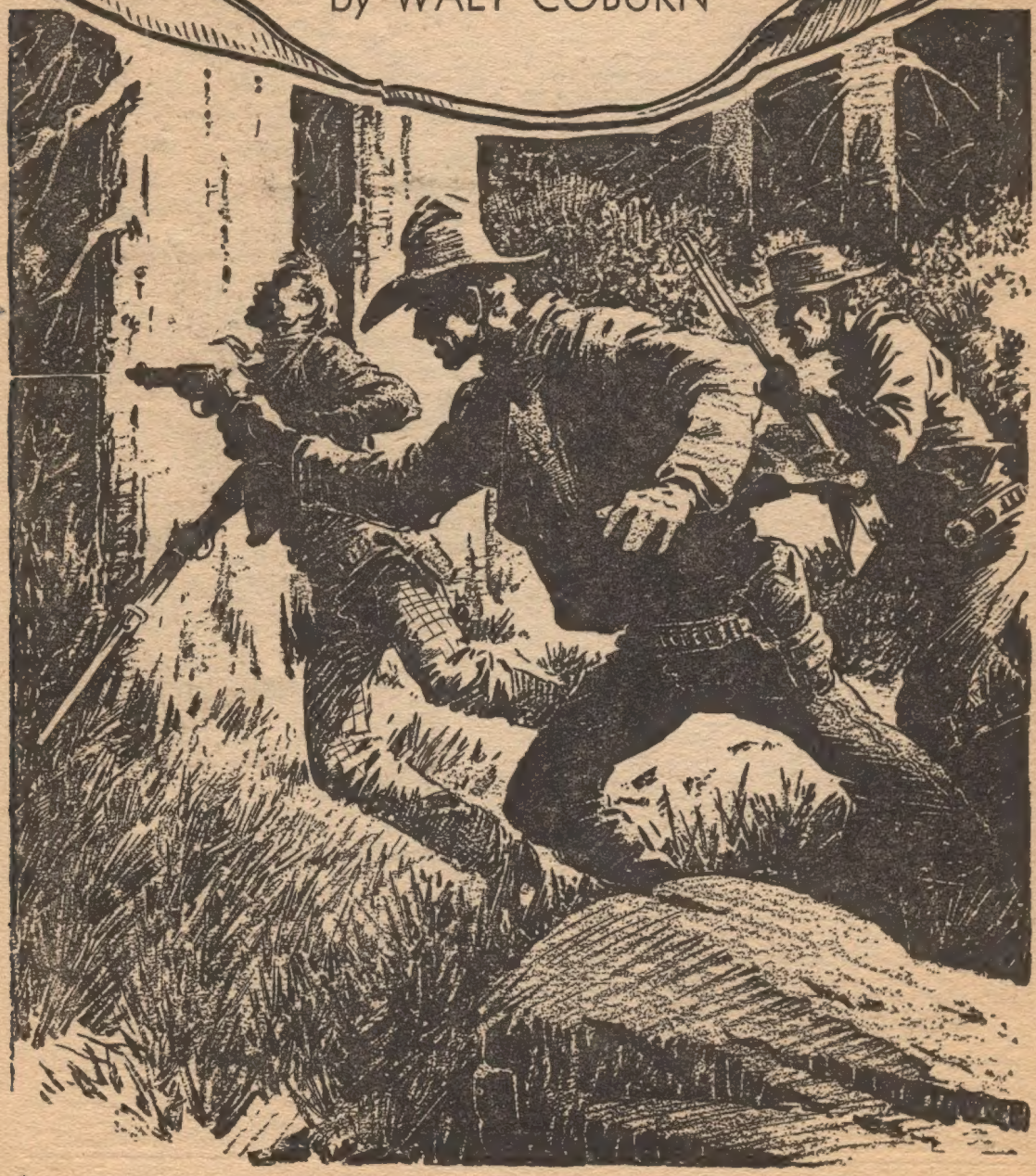
(4)

Leaving Goodnight to trail with the herds, Loving and Wilson forged ahead to secure the Government contract at Fort Sumner. They were chased by raiding Comanches, and surrounded on the banks of the Pecos. Again and again, though Loving was desperately wounded, they fought off the "red reapers." Wilson broke away to bring Goodnight's cowboys to the rescue, but when that outfit arrived, the fight was over; Loving had disappeared. Giving him up as dead, they headed for Fort Sumner... and found him already there, having escaped by superhuman efforts. But the Comanches had put the "Indian Sign" on Oliver after all, for his wounds proved fatal.

GRAY WOOL BRINGS GUNSMOKE!

Smashing range-war novel,

by WALT COBURN



The powerful saga of the bloodiest sheep-cattle war in Arizona history —and of a stranger who tried, with guts and guns, to carve himself a stake from that bleak war-torn range!

Morgan and the three cowmen started their zigzag run for safety, their guns spitting. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

No Gun-Help Wanted!

A SHEEPHERDER was squatted on his heels beside his breakfast fire when the carbine bullet tore a hole in the blackened pot of coffee that simmered at the edge of the bed of coals.

The crack of the gun sent echoes back into the rimrock canyons until the fading sound died in the pine-covered rim of the Sagitaria Mountains.

The herder reared backwards on his heels, his right hand reaching for his rifle. A second .30-30 bullet kicked hot coals in his face and a third slug struck the rifle-butt.

That took all the fight notion out of the man. He scrambled to his feet, his arms raised high and begged his unseen enemies not to kill him. His two dogs cowered against his legs, whimpering, too scared by the gunfire to bark.

Above the ragged rocks a hundred yards away, a lazy, drawling Texan voice gave the bewildered, frightened sheep-herder a grim warning: "Move them stinkin' woolies back the way you come or we'll kill 'em all. Then we'll kill your dogs. And then we'll hang you to a tree."

The warning was repeated in the Mexican language. The herder stood there nodding his head, his voice choked by fear.

A tall, rawboned cowpuncher with black hair and mustache, and wearing a flat-brimmed black hat, got on his horse and rode off into the rough pine covered country above the fertile Hondo Basin. He was followed by two other riders.

The sheep were now quitting their bed-ground, blatting noisily as they scattered. The herder picked up his gun with its bullet-ripped stock and gave his two dogs a command. The dogs bunched the scattered sheep and drove them back from the rim, heading the woolies back the way they had come yesterday. The herder was not crossing the rim of the Sagitarias. That was the deadline of the cowman beyond which no sheepman should cross. The penalty for trespassing was death.

But it was as if the wind had carried the hated odor of sheep across the Hondo Basin and back into the rustler hangouts in the broken canyons and timbered, rocky fastness of the Sagitarias. Because, long before the sun set that evening, the news of the attempted sheep invasion had reached every cattle ranch, round-up camp and rustler hangout in that remote part of Arizona Territory.

Cowboys from the big Hatchet outfit, scattered in range branding camps behind the rim, shared their supper with outlaws who rode in under a grim truce to talk sheep. And with that hated word was linked the names of the three Jimson boys, Sam, Pete and Jake, and their squaw-man father.

"Old Man Jimson's done 'er," they said with flat-toned finality.

Old Man Jimson had been threatening for a long time to fetch sheep across the rim of the Sagitarias and down into the fertile valley of the Hondo Basin. That was the Old Man Jimson's way of paying off the ugly, smoldering debt of hatred that he and his three big half-breed sons held against Rail Maxwell and his two sons, Blair and Holt.

THERE is no hatred as lasting and ugly as the hatred that grows from a broken friendship. And until two or three years ago the Jimsons and the Maxwells had been friends. They had been more than ordinary friends. Both ran small cow outfits and for several years, they had worked together against the big Hatchet outfit that claimed the bulk of the Sagitaria Mountains and ran its cattle the length of the Hondo Basin.

It was no secret that the Jimsons and Maxwells had fattened their herds with cattle stolen from the Hatchet outfit. And men swore that they did so with the secret aid of Black Jack Bedford, Hatchet ramrod, which outfit was owned by an Eastern syndicate.

There had been a bitter, blood-spattered flare-up over the division of a big bunch of stolen cattle. Old Man Jimson and Rail Maxwell had wounded one another in a

gun-fight at the little cowtown of Hondo, down in the valley. The boys had fought with fists and clubbed guns in the saloon, and some of the Hatchet cowpunchers had taken sides just for the hell of it. When the air had cleared, Old Man Jimson had a bullet-smashed thigh and Rail Maxwell's gun arm was broken below the shoulder by a .45 slug. Two of the Hatchet cowboys were lying dead.

So began the feud that had smoldered like a dying campfire which needs only a quick breeze to fetch it to flaring, devastating flame.

Black Jack Bedford buried his dead cowpunchers and cussed both the Jimsons and the Maxwells with equal fervor. They had spoiled a lucrative game for him with their damned quarrel, and now his only bet was to brand both outfits as rustlers. This he did loudly and bitterly as he issued saddle guns and cartridges to all the Hatchet cowpunchers.

Old Man Jimson, tall and gray as an old timber wolf, swore that if he couldn't get even with them damned thievin', double-crossin' Maxwells he'd sheep 'em out. But not even the enemies of the treacherous, hard hating squaw-man believed that he would be low-down enough to fetch sheep into the best cow country in Arizona Territory.

Less than a month before, however, Black Jack Bedford had sighted Old Man Jimson and his three big, fighting half-breed sons talking with Richardson, the big sheepman, at Flagstaff. Richardson was taking advantage of the feud between the Jimsons and Maxwells. That band of sheep that had tried to cross the rim of the Sagitarias wore his R brand stamped with new red paint on their greasy, woolly backs. And there were six more wether bands trailing that lead bunch.

OLD MAN JIMSON had made good his threat. His men were now guarding the sheep camps back of the rim. The Jimsons were going to give the invading sheep the protection of their guns. Every cowpuncher who worked for the Jimsons was tough and loyal and well paid. They had been picked from the outlaws who for years had made the rough Sagitaria Mountains their hideout. Those hired gun fighters and a handful of tough kin and friends were backing Old Man Jimson's sheep invasion.

The hand and gun of every other man was against the Jimsons. They rode now in twos and threes to the little cowtown of Hondo. They were riding there to take their orders from Rail Maxwell.

Black Jack Bedford and his Hatchet men, strangely enough, were the exception. He gave his men orders to have nothing to do with this feud between the Jimsons and the Maxwells. But he knew that there were men in his outfit who would disobey his orders because they hated sheep and sheepmen and because they were a hard bitten crew who were spoiling for a fight. And every man in the Hatchet outfit knew that it had been Black Jack Bedford and two of his top hands who had turned back that first band of sheep from the rim. But Black Jack Bedford gave his men orders to stay out of the feud, knowing that few of them had any kind of intention of remaining neutral. Then he got on his horse and rode alone to Hondo.

By nightfall no man in the Hondo Basin could take a neutral stand and be safe from the guns of both factions. A man must throw in with the Jimsons or the Maxwells, or get to hell out of Hondo Basin!

And so stood matters that sundown when Morgan MacLeod rode into the cowtown of Hondo. He was young, sandy haired, with sun-puckered gray eyes and a friendly, disarming grin on his clean shaven tanned face. He was also a stranger in a strange land, unwelcome and unwanted. There was not a man, woman or

child in the valley to offer him a friendly hand, for Hondo Basin wanted no stranger meddling in here. Their cold suspicious looks told him that as he left his horse and his pack-horse with other saddled horses at the long hitch-rack and walked boldly into the saloon.

CHAPTER TWO

First Blood in Hondo

RAIL MAXWELL was a big, slow-spoken man with a heavy beard and thick hair that had once been red and was now graying. Cold and forbidding when trouble crowded him, when he laughed his eyes lighted up with tiny bright sparks. For Rail Maxwell liked a joke even when it was on himself. An even-tempered man, he was slow to anger, but when roused he was hell on wheels.

His twin sons, Blair and Holt, lean, big-boned and red-headed, looked so much alike that men were always mistaking one for the other. Both had inherited their father's sense of humor but they lacked his even temper. They got on the prod too easily, but they fought fair and if they were in the wrong they were the first to admit it openly and frankly. Rail said that it took the both of 'em to pack a grudge any distance. Their features were large, roughly hewn, and their sunburned faces never tanned.

Rail Maxwell and his two sons stood at the end of the bar and Rail was talking to the crowd that had gathered around him, listening to the big cowman's words. He quit talking as the tall, sandy haired stranger came through the swinging half-doors.

Morgan MacLeod felt the cold scrutiny of the big cowman's eyes. The silence of the crowd and the unsheathed steel of their cold unfriendly stare was enough to wilt the courage of any man.

The friendly grin on Morgan MacLeod's face died slowly. Resentment at the unwarranted animosity of these men chilled the warmth in his gray eyes, leaving them cold and hard and steady. He looked squarely at Rail Maxwell.

"You don't need to look at a man," his voice was brittle with the anger that swept over him like a hot wave, "like he was a damned sheepherder!"

"Damned if he ain't declarin' hisself!" A big Hatchet cowpuncher, half drunk and spoiling for trouble, eager to show his toughness, stepped toward Morgan, his left hand holding a glass of whiskey, his right hand on his gun.

A flip of his hand threw the glass with its contents straight at Morgan's face. And in that same instant he pulled his gun.

Morgan MacLeod's head ducked and the glass with its spilling whiskey struck his hat crown. His left hand grabbed the Hatchet man's gun-arm at the wrist and his right fist smashed with a short, vicious swing. Blood spurted and there was the dull crack of smashed bone. He drove another short, hard blow into the Hatchet man's broken nose. The man's gun was wrenched from his hand and flung over the bar. Morgan tore into him with both fists slugging. He drove the Hatchet man backward against the bar and ripped in a couple of wicked punches to the man's belly, doubling him up. Then he knocked him down with a hard right and left. The beaten man rolled over on the floor, covering his smashed face with his arms.

Another Hatchet man came at Morgan with a rush, clubbing at his head with a long barreled six-shooter. Morgan dodged sideways and the gun barrel glanced off his shoulder. The blow numbed his left arm and he jerked his gun, slapping the man along the jaw with the barrel. The blow staggered the Hatchet man and Morgan's back-handed swing caught the man across the eyes and the bridge of his nose. His knees buckled. As he went down

Morgan kicked the gun from his hand. It exploded with a roar, the heavy lead slug tearing into the plank floor.

Morgan MacLeod's back was against the wall and his gun was swinging crossways in a line with the bellies of the men.

"Anybody else?" Morgan's face was drained of blood, his voice flat.

NOBODY spoke. No man made a gun move. It had happened in less than a couple of minutes. The two Hatchet men were on the floor, their faces covered with blood.

"I reckon," Rail Maxwell's slow voice broke an uneasy silence, "there's nobody wants chips in your game, stranger. Looks like you got the job done. Put up that shootin' iron before it goes off and somebody has to kill you to wean you off it. Have a drink."

Rail Maxwell shoved his big bulk through the crowd and his bearded lips grinned.

Morgan MacLeod slid his six-shooter back in its holster. He forced a grin. "I didn't aim to act like a damned fool," he said. "I ain't travelin' on my shape or tryin' for a tough rep. I come here peaceful."

"Why?"

To ask a man his name or his business was violating an unwritten law, but Rail Maxwell, chosen leader of the Hondo Basin cowmen, made it his business to know the reason for any stranger's presence in the valley.

Morgan MacLeod knew that he would have to answer. Perhaps Rail Maxwell thought he was some kind of a law officer from Prescott. They wanted no outside law officer mixing in their affairs here in the Hondo Basin.

Morgan wiped his hands on his faded, saddle-warped overalls and poured himself a drink. That gave him time to think up an answer that should suit this man he knew must be Rail Maxwell.

"I'd bin told," he grinned faintly, "that the Hondo Basin and the Sagitarias was one place a man could go where he wouldn't be questioned about his back-trail. I've got no law badge pinned to my undershirt. And I don't like the stink of sheep. I reckon that'll have to cover that question of yours, sir."

Rail Maxwell nodded slowly. He had filled his glass and now he was turning it back and forth on the liquor-stained pine bar.

"We're not hirin' gun-slingers, mister. We don't want ary outsiders mixin' into our personal affairs. The only outfit around here that might hire a man from the outside is the Hatchet." He paused a minute, grinning mirthlessly. "These two gents you just locked horns with work for the Hatchet."

Rail Maxwell and Morgan MacLeod were watching the two cowpunchers who had gotten to their feet and were leaning against the bar wiping at their battered faces.

The saloonman handed them each a soiled towel and told them to go out to the creek and wash up and he'd give them their guns when they came back.

"Mebbyso they'd have a drink with me," said Morgan. "Or do you boys aim to tie into me again when you come back?"

"Not me, mister," said the one who had started the fight. "I know when I got a bellyful. We'll drink with you and say we like it."

But Morgan did not need to have Rail Maxwell or any man tell him that he had made two hard hating enemies. They drank with him, and when the saloonman gave them back their guns, they went outside with their soiled towels and a quart bottle of whiskey.

"I wouldn't turn my back to the door if I was you," Rail Maxwell told Morgan. "They might come back a-shootin'. You can't never tell."

THE big cowman's voice was casual and there was no friendliness in it. Nor were any of the cowpunchers in the place thawing out by offering to buy him a drink. He was still an unwanted stranger in Hondo Basin. If he had been killed they would have buried him and never taken the trouble to find out who he was, where he came from, or why he had ridden into the forbidden valley.

He could have killed both those Hatchet men but he had not fired a shot. But that wasn't buying him anything in this feud torn strip of lawless cowcountry. They were waiting for him to fork his horse and ride on out of the Hondo Basin.

Morgan MacLeod knew how they felt and that made him all the more determined to stay.

This was not the time nor the place to tell Rail Maxwell or any other man why he had ignored the warning to keep out of Hondo Basin. He had ridden here to kill a man—maybe more than one man. And the hell of it was he didn't know yet who that man was, or who that man's friends were. Though he was already eliminating Rail Maxwell and his two big red-headed sons because they didn't look like cold-blooded murderers.

The Maxwells had been on the unwritten list of suspects he had tabulated in his mind, and he had so little in the way of information to go on.

Beyond the Hondo Basin and the Sagitaria Mountains he had picked up a confusing batch of stories that conflicted so much that he had little real knowledge to guide him. And once he had ridden into the forbidden country, the job ahead of him became even more difficult because no man in Hondo Basin was willing to talk. And now that the sheep had appeared on the skyline the thing looked almighty hopeless and so dangerous that it was like a man deliberately committing suicide. But Morgan MacLeod had come too far now to turn back. And even if he did try to turn back his chances of ever getting out of Hondo Basin alive were slim.

Across the street was the general store. He asked the saloon man if the store was open this late in the evening. The barman nodded. Nobody was asking him to have a drink. The two Maxwell boys and the others had unobtrusively moved away from him and were drinking at the far end of the bar, talking among themselves about nothing in particular and all of them covertly watching him from under their hatbrims.

Rail Maxwell alone had talked to him and now the big cowman had taken a small brand tally book from the pocket of his old denim jacket and was putting down some figures in it with a stubby pencil, ignoring Morgan as if he were not there.

Morgan MacLeod hitched up his cartridge belt and walked out. The clump of his boot heels and the jingle of his silver mounted spurs sounded loudly through the awkward silence.

HE WALKED across the wide, dusty street, now shadowed in the twilight, then through the open doorway into the store where the store keeper, a little gray-haired man who walked with a limp, was lighting a big lamp that swung from the low ridge log by brass chains. At the rear of the store was a partitioned room and a cubbyhole window beside the door. Above the window was a sign that read "United States Post Office."

As the lamplight took away the shadows Morgan saw a gray-haired woman and a red-haired girl waiting on themselves at a long counter that was piled with bolts of muslin and gingham.

The woman had her back turned and had not even seen Morgan come in. But the girl was eyeing him with an embarrassing frank curiosity. She was wearing

a shabby gray flannel blouse and a leather riding skirt that had seen hard usage. She wore cowpuncher boots and her man's Stetson lay on the counter. Her hair had been cut off just above her shoulders. It was thick and curly and the color of burnished copper. Her tanned face was freckled and her eyes were a dark smoky gray.

Morgan flushed under her frank stare. He touched his hatbrim and she smiled faintly and nodded and then turned her back. He needed nobody to tell him that she was a Maxwell.

The little storekeeper stepped down from his step ladder and took off his steel-rimmed spectacles, wiping them and putting them back on.

"Stranger, ain't you?" His voice was sharp as a knife blade. As sharp as the pale blue eyes behind the spectacles.

Morgan nodded. "I want a slab of bacon, ten pounds of sugar, a ten pound sack of salt, some coffee and beans. And six boxes of .30-30 and .45 cartridges. Put the stuff in two gunnysacks."

The little storekeeper moved briskly. Morgan added a caddy of smoking tobacco to the stuff he was putting in the two gunnysacks.

"How many ca'tridges, again?"

"Six boxes of .30-30. Six boxes of 45's."

"Goin' to war, young feller?"

"When you're in Rome, the sayin' says," grinned Morgan, "you do as the Romans do."

"And you're feelin' right lucky," cackled the little storekeeper, "gittin' all that smokin' tobacco! Reckon you'll last long enough to smoke 'er all?"

He was not letting that morsel of wit get wasted so he spoke in a louder voice than was necessary. The red-haired girl turned and looked at Morgan again and there was no smile on her lips now. Her face looked white and her eyes were dark with fear.

THE gray-haired woman was also looking at him, and Morgan saw her face. It was the girl's face grown old before her time. Etched with lines put there by worry and sorrow and the overhanging shadow of fear and dread. There was a look in her eyes that was going to haunt Morgan MacLeod as long as he lived because her eyes were already seeing bloodshed and disaster and the ugliness and terror of a bitter range war. She was wearing a black dress as if she were already in mourning for her dead.

Morgan felt like choking the sharp-tongued little storekeeper. The gray-haired woman in black dropped the bolt of cloth she held in her hands and now she walked towards Morgan, pushing aside the girl's restraining hand.

A few feet in front of Morgan she stopped and her voice was low pitched, vibrant.

"There's blood on your hands! Your soul is damned with the crime of Cain!" She held a big black covered Bible in both hands.

Then the girl was at her side and she led the older woman away, her young arm around the quivering black-clad shoulders. As they went out together, the little storekeeper came out from behind the partition where he had ducked like a scared rabbit.

"She's bin like that since the evenin' she was drivin' home from town and come slap-dab on the tree below the Hale place where young Bob Hale was still swingin'. Her team fetched her home to the Maxwell ranch with her lyin' like dead on the buckboard seat. She's bin touched ever since.

"She won't stay at the ranch no more. Lives here in town and even Rail and her own sons don't dast come near her because it sets her off into one of them tantrums. She reads her Bible day and night, and Mary and my missus is the only ones kin do anything with her. One of the fin-

est wimmen that ever lived. Kind and gentle-hearted.

"Her clothes was covered with dirt and she'd cut down young Bob Hale's hung body and got a shovel and dug a grave and rolled his dead body in a tarp and buried it herself. And May God A'mighty damn the men that hung Bob Hale and done that to that little woman!"

A shadow fell across the floor of the store and Black Jack Bedford, ramrod of the Hatchet outfit, stood there in the doorway, his black hat slanted across the coldest pair of steel-blue eyes Morgan MacLeod had ever seen. Black Jack Bedford's hand was on his gun. The thin lipped mouth under his drooping black moustache spread in a mirthless smile.

"I'm lookin' for the fightin' man that whipped two of my Hatchet cowpunchers!" he said.

CHAPTER THREE

At a Dead Man's Cabin

MORGAN MACLEOD'S gun slid from its holster and he would have answered what had all the earmarks of a gun-fight challenge with bullets, but the little spectacled, limping storekeeper stood between him and the black-hatted man in the doorway. Stood there with his arms waving in an orator's gesture of wrath, his sharp-edged voice condemning the men who had hung a man named Bob Hale. He had whirled at the sound of Black Jack Bedford's slurred voice—a voice all the more deadly for its soft drawl—and now he stood as if rooted to the floor.

Then the red-haired girl stood behind the Hatchet ramrod and her hand gripped the sleeve of his short denim brush jacket and her voice was barely loud enough to carry to Morgan, as he stood with his gun in his hand.

"Quit it, Jack! Let him alone!"

Black Jack Bedford's hand came away from his gun. As the girl gripped his fingers, he grinned down at her with a possessive look that strangely angered Morgan beyond all reason. Then his cold gray eyes looked at Morgan and his smile mocked the young cowpuncher.

"Put up your gun, stranger. Don't be so jumpy. I stepped across the street to have a little medicine talk with the man who pulled the burrs out of the bushy tails of my two toughest cowhands. You put 'em out of commission and left me short-handed. The Hatchet pays top wages to a real fightin' man. I come over to the store to hire you. My name's Bedford and I'm roddin' the Hatchet spread."

Morgan MacLeod told himself that the Hatchet ramrod was mighty nimble-witted to twist a fight talk into an offer to hire him. And the way he had done it made Morgan look like some nervous-triggered pilgrim who has been spooked into yanking out his gun.

The little storekeeper came unrooted and hopped out of the line of fire between the stranger and Black Jack Bedford. Bedford's thin lips spread in a contemptuous grin and he let go the girl's hand and his arm went around her shoulders. She flushed a little and shrugged his arm off without any show of anger. She was looking straight at Morgan.

Morgan shoved his gun back into its holster and took a roll of money from the pocket of his overalls.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked the storekeeper.

"I'll have 'er figgered up in a jiffy, mister." He hobbled in behind the partition to tally up the bill and Morgan took tobacco and papers from his pocket and rolled a cigarette.

"My guns ain't for hire, Bedford."

"Come away, Jack," said the red-haired girl. She took hold of his arm and said something to him in a low tone. He nodded and smiled faintly.

"If I was in your fix then, stranger, I'd get out of Hondo Basin before sunrise."

Black Jack Bedford slid his arm around the red-haired girl's slim waist and led her outside and out of sight.

The little storekeeper slipped out from behind the post office partition.

"Twenty-seven dollars and six-bits, mister. For the life of me I can't see what a girl like Mona Maxwell sees in that spur-jingler. She's a leetle wild, meb-by, but no monkeyshines about her. And Rail has told her to keep away from Black Jack but she's headstrong thataway. Got a mind of her own and the surest way in the world to make her do somethin' she hadn't orter do is to tell her not to. You can't handle a hackamore colt with a spade bit. Whew! I thought Black Jack was goin' to shoot the buttons off your shirt, young feller!"

MORGAN nodded and counted over three ten dollar bills and waited for his change. He ventured a cautious question, making his tone sound casual. "I heard about the hangin' of Bob Hale. Was he mixed up in this sheep war?"

"Bob Hale minded his own business. As clean and upstandin' a young cowboy as ever paid cash at my store. Friendly and quiet and never got drunk and shot his gun off careless to act tough. He was ag'in sheep, of course, though he never made no whiskey-talk about it.

"But no man kin live in Hondo Basin without makin' enemies. For all his quiet ways Bob Hale had plenty men hatin' him."

The little storekeeper's index finger tallied against the fingers of his left hand. "First, Black Jack Bedford was jealous of him on account of Mona Maxwell go-in' to dances with Bob. And then the Hatchet wanted Bob Hale's place at the head of Manzanita Crick just under the rim, and Bob wouldn't sell out.

"The Jimsons wanted his ranch, too. Wanted it mighty bad. It's the purtiest ranch in Hondo Basin. Plenty of water and feed all the year 'round. Old Man Jimson told him he'd better sell or some day he'd sheep him out."

For a moment the old man was silent, his faded eyes gazing into the shadows. Then: "The Maxwells never bothered Bob Hale one way or the other. And Miz Maxwell treated Bob like he was her own son because she could trust Mona with him without worryin' about him gittin' into a whiskey fight when he took Mona to dances and the Prescott Fourth of July doin's.

"Bob Hale's door was never barred to any man. His ranch is up against the rim and near the outlaw hideouts. And them rustlers was as welcome to stop for a bait of grub as any of the more honest cow-boys that wasn't dodgin' the sheriff. And now and then one of 'em would make Bob Hale the present of a horse and like as not the horse would be wearin' a blotched brand. And that's how come the news got spread around that Bob Hale was dealin' in stolen horses.

"The night Bob Hale got strung up there was a deputy sheriff from Apache County here at Hondo. He was drinkin' heavy at the saloon acrost the street and when I was over there for a little night-cap I heard this glory-huntin' deputy say he had a bench warrant for Bob Hale for horse stealin'. He left town durin' the night to serve the warrant.

"The deputy's name is Bert Cutter. Ever hear of him, mister?"

Morgan was silent.

"He brags that he rode with Billy the Kid over in New Mexico in the Lincoln County War," continued the storeman. "Richardson and some other sheepmen over in Apache County hired him to pro-tect their sheep int'rests and they pinned a law badge on him.

"Bert Cutter quit Hondo Basin the night Bob Hale got hung. It come out in

the Holbrook and Prescott papers that Cutter said he quit the Hondo Basin because it was too tough for him. That he served the bench warrant on Bob Hale and that a bunch of night riders took Bob away from him and hung Bob. He said he couldn't identify any of the night riders. That if he give out so much as one name of any man he suspected they'd hunt him down and murder him. . . . Here's your change, young feller. I've talked too damn much again. The missus says my tongue-waggin' will git me into trouble yet. But may God A'mighty punish the cowards that lynched young Bob Hale!"

MORGAN MACLEOD was beginning to like the little storekeeper who talked too much. His name was Henry Lampkin and he had been crippled by a Yankee bullet at Gettysburg. Morgan had a notion to confide in him a little but thought better of it. Not because he didn't trust the garrulous little man, but talk is dangerous and Morgan MacLeod had to be cautious if he hoped to live long here in Hondo Basin.

He told Henry Lampkin "So-long", and took his two bulging gunnysacks across the street. The two Maxwell boys and three or four other cowpunchers were standing out in front of the saloon. They watched him tie his filled sacks on top of his bed that was roped to his pack horse with a diamond hitch. There was no sign of Black Jack Bedford or his two Hatchet cowhands.

Nobody spoke to Morgan as he mounted his horse and rode off along the main wagon road that lead to Prescott. But they watched him ride away and he had a notion he was being followed as he left town. A few miles farther on he quit the road and headed north towards the rim of the Sagitarias that was outlined in the distance against the moonlit sky. He was heading straight for the Bob Hale ranch.

If anybody was following him, they were doing a cautious job of cold trailing. He reckoned it must be close to midnight when he rode up to the ranch where Bob Hale had been hanged.

Nobody was living there now. The corrals and barn and log cabin were deserted, neglected looking. Beneath the low sycamore limb that had been Bob Hale's gallows, a white painted wooden slab marked the lonely grave. Morgan reined up and pulled off his hat.

"I got here, Bob." His voice was hushed, hardly audible above the whispering of the leaves of the big old sycamore. "I got here too late to side you, pardner. But I'll do my best to play your string out."

Then he rode on to the deserted cabin.

FROM somewhere in the broken canyons of the Sagitarias a lobo wolf howled dismally at the round white moon. And the night noises made by the little animals in the brush kept Morgan MacLeod from sleeping in the thick manzanita thicket behind the cabin, where he had taken a couple of blankets. So he was wide awake when he heard the rattle of buggy wheels on the rocky road.

He pulled on his boots, took his carbine and crept silently through the brush towards the big sycamore tree where the rig had stopped.

He could make out the team and buckboard, and the white-haired woman in black with the black shawl. Rail Maxwell's wife. Her daughter, Mona, was tying the team to a nearby sapling. The woman in black had her Bible and she knelt beside the grave with its white painted slab and was praying aloud.

Morgan crouched behind the brush and watched Mona Maxwell walk toward the cabin. Then he followed her by a roundabout way.

He had left his grub, most of his blankets and sougans in their bed tarp in the

cabin. He knew that Mona Maxwell must have sighted his two horses, grazing in the little pasture behind the barn. She was almost running as she neared the cabin, as if she was frightened. Then she was rapping on the cabin door, calling in a cautious voice.

Morgan stepped from the brush and hailed her, keeping his voice low.

"What's wrong, ma'am?"

She whirled like a wild animal, and ran toward him. Against her face, chalky white in the moonlight, the freckles across her small nose showed plainly.

"Saddle your horse and get away from here! Quick, before it's too late! Before—"

"Drop that gun and claw for the moon!" drawled Black Jack's voice from some brush near the cabin. "Mona, go back to your mother. Get in that buckboard and hit the trail for town, unless you want her to see another hangin'! Keep your hands high, stranger. The boys are rearin' to take 'er up where they left off in town. Get the hell gone, Mona!"

"Better do what the Hatchet gent says, miss," Morgan advised evenly. "And don't worry about him hangin' anybody tonight. If he shoots me it'll be murder, and from what I've heard, Rail Maxwell don't like cold-blooded murder. If I turn up missin' there's a letter I dropped in the mail slot at the store. It's addressed to Morgan MacLeod, care of the Hondo post office. I mailed it to myself with a forwarding address in care of the sheriff at Prescott if it ain't called for in ten days. That letter will hang the man who murders me. I'm Morgan MacLeod. Better git back to your mother before she finds out somethin's wrong."

"You heard what this man said, Jack. He's Morgan MacLeod. Bob Hale told me—"

"How about keepin' a dead man's secret?" Morgan interrupted the girl. He was wondering how far he could trust her if she was in love with Black Jack Bedford.

"If you kill him, Jack," Mona Maxwell's voice was clear and steady, "I'll know you lied about Bob Hale's hanging."

She turned and ran back, helping her mother into the rig. They drove away at a fast trot.

Black Jack Bedford let the noise of the buckboard fade before he spoke. "So you're a damned snake with a law badge in your pocket, are you, Mister Morgan MacLeod? You're goin' to find out what happens to your breed of snake when they come slippin' into the Hondo Basin. Take his six-shooter, boys. Then tie into 'im and do the job right. We ain't killin' you, mister, but you'll never look the same again. Git 'im, men!"

To make a gun play would only get Morgan a bullet in the back. The two battered Hatchet men had guns in their hands when they came from the brush. Morgan stood with his hands raised to the level of his shoulders until they came closer. One man was in front of him, and the other came up from behind.

Morgan felt the man behind him yank his six-shooter from its holster. He whirled and dove at the man and they went down in a tangle. The man's gun roared and powder burned the side of Morgan's face. Then both of them were on top of him, clubbing at his head. A gun barrel thudded against his skull and a white flash of pain shot across his eyes. Then everything was blackness. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Three Fresh Graves to Dig!

HE WAS still only half conscious when he heard shooting, He tried to fight back out of the numb darkness but it was no go. He could neither move or get his eyes open, and there was only that sound

of shooting which might be the echoes of the Hatchet man's one shot reverberating in his numbed brain. And then even that sound ceased. . . .

It must have been three or four hours later when Morgan MacLeod's eyes blinked open. He moved his arms and his hands rubbed at his eyes. It was daylight and he was lying out in the open near the cabin. His face was caked with drying blood and his thick hair was matted with it and his head throbbed with stabbing pain. He sat up, surprised to find his six-shooter in his hand and his saddle gun lying on the ground nearby. He picked them up and his pain-seared eyes looked around. He saw the dead bodies of the two Hatchet cowpunchers lying on the ground not fifty feet away. There was no sign of Black Jack Bedford.

His horses were grazing peacefully. He walked to the creek and squatted on the bank, gingerly washing his head and face. One eye was almost shut and was cut above the eyebrow. His nose was badly swollen and his nostrils blood-clogged. Busted, he told himself. They had certainly worked him over with their guns!

He wondered how the two Hatchet men had been killed. They were both plenty alive and scrapping the last he remembered before they knocked him cold as a black wedge. His gun, when he examined it, had not been fired.

He heard the sound of shod hoofs and grabbed his gun. He was on his feet, his six-shooter in his hand, as Rail Maxwell and his two red-headed sons reined up their sweat-streaked horses.

"Put up your gun, MacLeod," said Rail Maxwell gruffly. "You don't need it right now. Looks like you bit off too big a hunk of Hatchet meat and choked tryin' to swaller it."

Blair and Holt Maxwell were examining the two dead Hatchet cowboys.

"This 'un got shot in the back, Rail," called Holt. They had always called their father by his first name and he treated them more like an older brother than a father. "One empty shell in his six-shooter."

"And his pardner," said Blair, straightening up from his examination of the other man, "was shot from behind and in front, both!" He looked at the dead man's gun. "Three empty shells. He died a-fightin'."

Morgan MacLeod looked up at the big cattleman who still sat his horse, his weight in one stirrup. "Mebby you'd like to take a look at my gun?'

Maxwell shook his head. "Your gun's loaded, MacLeod. You wouldn't be packin' a six-shooter with empty shells in it. I don't know how you got beat up or how them two Hatchet gun-fighters got killed. But your name is Morgan MacLeod and you belong to the Texas Rangers. You've horned in where you don't belong. Before you git yourself killed and the law blames some of us for your murder, my two boys will help you load your bed and they'll ride with you till you're out of Hondo Basin. When we want the law messin' in our affairs, mister, we'll holler. You told me in town that you wasn't packin' a law-badge. You lied."

MORGAN'S bruised lips grinned. "If you find a law-badge on me, I'll eat it. I turned in my Ranger badge before I left Texas. Your daughter should have kept quiet about—"

"My daughter? What's Mona got to do with this?" Rail Maxwell's voice lost something of its calmness. "What are you tryin' to talk about?"

"It must have been her that told you my name; that I was a Ranger and a friend of Bob Hale's."

"Henry Lampkin found your letter in the mail with the forwarding directions to the sheriff at Prescott. I got a man workin' for me named McCloud and Henry

figgered the letter was for him. Lampkin give me the letter to give to Mac. Mac opened it and couldn't make sense out of it, so he handed it to me.

"The letter stated that the writer had come to Hondo Basin to investigate the murder of Bob Hale and that he might git murdered. It gave a list of men to suspect. My name and the names of my two sons had bin on the list but had bin crossed out. The Jimsons, Black Jack Bedford and Bert Cutter was left on the list."

Rail Maxwell's cold eyes studied Morgan MacLeod. "I talked to Henry Lampkin and he said that it must have bin the stranger who bought grub and ca'tridges and had a run-in with Black Jack who dropped the letter in the mail slot. So we rode here to the Bob Hale place. We find you beat up and mebby shot, and the two Hatchet men you locked horns with in town is dead. And now what in hell has Mona got to do with it? You'd better talk fast and straight."

Mona Maxwell hadn't talked, and Morgan had to think fast to keep her protected. He suspected that she had figured on meeting Black Jack Bedford here last night when she fetched her mother out to visit Bob Hale's grave. She wouldn't want her father to know about that tryst.

"I met your daughter at the Lampkin store and I told her that my name was Morgan MacLeod. Bob Hale had told her that we'd bin raised together in Texas and that I belonged to the Texas Rangers. When you called me by name and called me a Ranger I took it for granted that she'd told you."

Rail Maxwell stared hard at him and the two big red-headed cowboys were eyeing him with cold suspicion.

"Mona fetches my wife here to the grave of Bob Hale sometimes of a night. I reckon you know that she's never bin right in her mind since she come on Bob Hale's dead body a-hangin' to the big sycamore. She wasn't here when you killed them two Hatchet men?"

"So far as I know," said Morgan truthfully, "she shore wasn't anywheres near here. And before we do anything else, supposin' we look around here for sign. Because I didn't kill the two Hatchet cowpunchers. They got shot down after they'd knocked me cold." Morgan wasn't mentioning Black Jack Bedford's name. Not yet, anyhow.

"You don't look like a liar, but your story don't sound right, MacLeod. Take a look around the brush, boys."

THE AWAKENING OF MR. A.
MR. A.: Whew! I hate the very thought of having to take a cathartic.
MR. B.: You wouldn't if you'd only try Ex-Lax. It tastes swell—just like chocolate.
MR. A.: Why, that's what we give to the youngsters. What I need is dynamite!
MR. B.: Don't kid yourself! Ex-Lax is plenty effective, but it won't upset you.
LATER
MR. A.: Boy, I feel like a million this morning! That Ex-Lax sure is great stuff!
MR. B.: You said it, pal! We've been using Ex-Lax in our family for 30 years!
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet *gentle!* No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax the next time you need a laxative. It's good for *every* member of the family.
10¢ and 25¢
EX-LAX
THE CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE

They found sign that showed them three horses had been tied in the brush a few hundred yards from the cabin. They found the boot tracks of three men, too. Then Morgan MacLeod and Rail Maxwell found the tracks of a fourth horse off in another direction behind a manzanita thicket, and the boot tracks of a fourth man who had crouched there in the brush. When they searched the trampled grass they found a half dozen empty .30-30 shells.

RAIL MAXWELL, maintaining a grim silence, examined Morgan's .30-30 carbine. The barrel was clean, unfouled by burned powder. He examined the breech of the saddle gun, sniffing it.

"That lets you out. The two Hatchet men was shot by steel-jacket bullets that drilled clean holes. And you shore as hell wasn't in any shape to give that saddle gun of yours a slick cleanin'. There was another man with the two Hatchet fellers. And there was a fourth man hid here. It's another Chinee puzzle, boys. MacLeod, kin you clear 'er up any?"

"No. I was knocked out when the shootin' happened. But I'll clear it up if I stay here. And I aim to stay. Bob Hale was my pardner. You'll find the deed to this ranch is recorded in my name and Bob Hale's. It belongs to me now. So does any cattle and horses that's left in the HM brand. This ranch is mine, an' I'm not runnin' away from it. When I find the man or the men that strung Bob Hale to that tree, I'm playin' my pardner's string out. You kin kill me, but you ain't runnin' me out of Hondo Basin. That goes as she lays."

The two Maxwell sons were looking at their father now. And Rail Maxwell was looking hard at Morgan MacLeod.

"You're writin' your own ticket, MacLeod," said the big cattleman slowly. "I wouldn't give a Mexican peso for your chances to keep on livin'."

Rail Maxwell motioned to his two big red-headed sons. "We got a long ride to make. Let's go."

Morgan watched the three Maxwells ride away. Their cold-blooded way of letting him know that he was playing a lone-handed game filled him with that same hot resentment he had felt in the saloon when they had eyed him with that cold unfriendliness. They sure knew how to make a man feel that he had horned in where he didn't belong.

They had made no offer to help him dispose of the dead bodies of the two Hatchet cowpunchers. He was writing his own ticket, Rail Maxwell had told him. He was a stranger in a strange land; an unwanted outsider.

"Where nobody lives," he grinned mirthlessly as he went to hunt for a pick and shovel to dig two graves, "and the dogs bark at strangers."

He ripped his bed tarp in two with his jackknife to make shrouds for the two dead cowboys. But before he began the grim chore of grave-digging, he cooked a hasty breakfast and drank a pot of strong black coffee. Then, because he might need to ride in a hurry, he saddled his horse and let him graze with a hackamore. It was when he was on his way with a pick and shovel to dig the graves that he heard a horse nicker somewhere not far off.

He dropped his digging tools and slipped off into the brush with his carbine, making his way cautiously toward where the nicker had sounded.

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour before he located the saddled horse, its bridle reins caught in the brush. There was dried blood on the saddle, and the horse wore the Jimson Circle J brand. On the ground not far away was a dead man.

THE man was young. He had straight black hair and the pallor of death could not fade the swarthiness of his skin.

He had been shot half a dozen times, and as near as Morgan could tell, the man had been shot twice in the back and the other shots fired later. One between the eyes and another couple of shots through the chest. Any one of the half dozen shots would have done the killing in a few seconds.

There was a brand tally book in the dead man's jacket pocket. On the inside of the cover was written the name Pete Jimson.

Morgan took a look at the carbine shoved in the saddle scabbard and found the inside of the barrel fouled with burned powder. When he trailed back he found that the tracks of Pete Jimson and his horse led to the brush clump where Morgan and Rail Maxwell had found the empty .30-30 shells.

Morgan tried to reconstruct last night's killings in his mind. At first he had half suspected Black Jack Bedford of killing the two Hatchet men. But now he had an altogether different version of it.

As near as he could figure out, Black Jack Bedford had not showed himself. That one shot from the Hatchet man's gun had fetched Pete Jimson. Young Jimson had ridden up and seen the two Hatchet men beating up a third man. He had shot them and, for some reason, Bedford had not taken part in the gun-fight.

Young Pete Jimson must have taken a look at Morgan as he lay on the ground apparently dead. Startled to find that he had killed two Hatchet men on account of a stranger, when no doubt he had thought they were beating a Jimson man to death, Pete Jimson had ridden away.

Black Jack Bedford had laid for him yonder in the brush and bushwacked him as he rode along the winding trail that led to the rim of the Sagitarias. Then Bedford had ridden off, letting whoever found the dead men puzzle out the killings as best they knew how. Regardless of Mona Maxwell's warning, Black Jack Bedford had wanted his two tough Hatchet cowpunchers to beat Morgan MacLeod to death.

Some of the Jimsons would be showing up to find out what had become of the youngest of the three brothers. And when they found a battered looking stranger camped at the Bob Hale place they'd shoot first and ask questions later. The Jimsons had the reputation of being Injun fighters.

Morgan MacLeod was in a tight. Here were three dead men to account for, and the only man who could explain it was Black Jack Bedford. Morgan would have bet all he had, including his chances of living long, that the Hatchet ramrod was a long ways from here right now. He'd be smiling that thin-lipped, sinister smile, saying nothing and getting no small amount of satisfaction out of everything that had happened, whether or not the stranger who called himself Morgan MacLeod was dead.

Morgan pulled the bridle off the Circle J horse and hung it on the horn of the bloodstained saddle. He slapped the horse on the rump and the animal hit the trail for home at a lope. He packed the body of young Pete Jimson to the spot where the Hatchet men lay rolled in their tarpaulin shrouds. Then he set to work digging graves.

While he labored, the sweat rolled off his bruised head and face, and he kept listening and watching for the approach of riders. His carbine lay on the ground within easy reach and there was a clump of heavy brush within jumping distance of where he was digging the three graves.

He had just about completed his task when half a dozen riders came into sight. He dove into the brush, his carbine gripped tightly in his blistered, sweaty hand.

A short, heavy built man rode in the lead of the others. The morning sun caught the metal badge pinned to his un-

buttoned brush jacket. Morgan had seen the man at Prescott and knew that he was Deputy Sheriff Bert Cutter from Apache County, the glory-hunting killer who had ridden with Billy the Kid in New Mexico's Lincoln County War. And riding alongside the badman-deputy was Mona Maxwell!

CHAPTER FIVE

A Badge Hides a Killer

MEN have been hung on far less evidence than these three dead men. Morgan MacLeod would have made a run for it if he could have gotten to his saddled horse. He heard brush crackling not far away and he figured that Cutter had scattered his men out in a circle that was closing in on him. This Bert Cutter, Morgan knew, was a killer with a polished badge, and a notched gun, traveling on his tough rep and on the trail for more gun-glory. But he would not dare hang a man or shoot him down in cold blood if Rail Maxwell's daughter was there for a witness.

Cutter saw Morgan's saddled horse near the cabin. Then he sighted the three open graves and the three shroud-wrapped bodies.

He reined up with a jerk and said something to the girl, pointing with his six-shooter toward the open graves. Morgan could not catch the deputy's words. He saw the girl shake her head in a bewildered manner.

"Scatter out, men," called Bert Cutter. "Shoot to kill if anything moves in the brush!"

"Stand your hand, Cutter!" called Morgan sharply. "Keep your men bunched. If any of your two-legged bloodhounds takes a shot at this brush I'll put a bullet through your briskit!"

Mona Maxwell laughed unsteadily. "You and your hired killers smell of sheep, Cutter. And it's open season all the year around on sheepherders in Hondo Basin."

Deputy Sheriff Bert Cutter grinned. Morgan could hear the men behind him coming nearer, closing in for the kill.

Mona Maxwell gigged her horse with the spurs and came toward Morgan's brush shelter at a long lope. Her horse shied at the open graves and shrouded dead men and then she rode in behind the brush and swung from the saddle. Cutter was cussing thickly and his men shifted uneasily in their saddles, their guns in their hands.

"He's got men surrounding the place," Mona Maxwell said, her voice sharp with alarm. "Maybe you can get back through the brush. Take my horse."

The girl had nerve and her wits were sharp. She was risking her life to give a stranger the breaks.

"Shove this under your jacket." Morgan had taken Pete Jimson's six-shooter and had shoved it into the waistband of his overalls. He handed it to the girl.

"You kin slip it back to me if I git in a tight. He won't dare hang me if you're there for a witness. And here's my jackknife in case you have to cut me loose."

Then Morgan called out to the burly deputy. "You're the Law, Cutter. I'm surrenderin' peaceful if you promise me full protection!"

"Throw your guns away and step out in the open with your hands up! You're under arrest right now, whoever the hell you are!"

MORGAN grinned at Mona Maxwell and stood erect. He tossed his carbine and saddle gun out towards the three shrouded dead men. "Stay here," he said to the girl and walked boldly into the open, his hands in the air.

But Mona Maxwell was not staying there in the brush. She went out with him.

"Hold your fire, sheepherders!" she called to Cutter and his men.

Cutter and the four men with him came up at a lope, their guns in their hands. At a nod from the heavy-set deputy, the four tough looking men swung from their saddles and tied Morgan's hands behind his back with a hogging-string.

"Unwrap them three dead 'uns," snapped Cutter.

"Better turn your head, lady," said Morgan.

But Mona Maxwell paid no attention to his words. She stared, white-faced, as they pulled the tarps from the two dead Hatchet men.

Then they pulled away the blanket and revealed the blood spattered form of Pete Jimson. The girl gave a sharp little cry of astonishment. Her eyes, so dark gray that they looked almost black, shot Morgan a quick look of bewildered surprise.

It suddenly dawned on Morgan that she expected the third dead man to be Black Jack Bedford. Probably she had thought all along that he had killed Bedford and the two Hatchet cowpunchers. And yet she had sided him in a tight. Morgan looked at her and grinned and in answer she forced a stiff-lipped smile.

"It's Pete!" grunted Bert Cutter. His voice sounded as if he hadn't meant to speak but shock had given words to his thoughts.

"It's Pete, all right," said one of the men. They were all riding Circle J horses. Shot in the back!"

"And so is one of the Hatchet fellers," said another man.

They were all staring hard now at Morgan MacLeod. Cutter was frankly puzzled. There was an ugly glint in his eyes when he spoke. "You'd need all the shyster lawyers in Arizona Territory to pull your head out of a hangin' rope, mister. You ain't got a foot to stand on."

"Is that the way you hung Bob Hale?" Mona Maxwell spoke up.

Cutter glared at her. Pointing his gun in the air he shot twice and then ejected the two empty shells from his gun and reloaded. He sat his saddle squarely, weight in both stirrups, a leering grin on his wide mouth and his bloodshot brownish green eyes coldly studying Morgan MacLeod.

His men came riding through the brush from all sides until Morgan counted eight of them, besides the bull-necked, pug-nosed deputy. Every man of them was mounted on a Circle J horse. They were as tough a looking bunch of gun-toters as ever Morgan had seen at one time.

"And they all stink of sheep," said Mona Maxwell to Morgan. "Smell 'em, Morgan?"

MONA MAXWELL was calling him by his first name and acting as if she knew him well. She was visibly relieved that the third dead man had not been Black Jack Bedford. He wondered how she happened to be with Cutter and his deputized possemen, but this was not the time nor the place to ask her any questions.

"So you figgered on buryin' the men you bushwhacked," said Bert Cutter flatly. "Then coverin' the ground to hide their bodies, mebby."

"Where I come from," said Morgan, "we bury a dead man before varmints git to him."

"And just where do you come from, and what's your name?" growled Cutter. "In case I take a notion to notify ary kin you're leavin' behind when you git hung," he added with an ugly grin.

"I come from down on the Pecos in Texas. From the same range Bob Hale come from. Where buryin' a man you find dead ain't a hangin' crime."

"Bert Cutter," said Mona Maxwell, "comes from that strip of the Indian Territory they call No Man's Land. That's where they leave the dead for the coyotes

and buzzards. Quit trying to run a whizzer, Cutter. You hang Morgan MacLeod and the Maxwells will swarm around you thicker than hornets." She mounted her horse with the ease of a born rider.

"Put him on his horse," said Bert Cutter. "We'll let Old Man Jimson ask him how come he shot young Pete in the back." He turned to Mona Maxwell. The ugly, hungry look in his bloodshot eyes matched his leering grin.

"The boys will take your friend Morgan MacLeod to the Jimson ranch. I'll ride a ways with you to see that you don't git lonesome. And in case we meet up with Rail Maxwell and you take a notion to run off at the head, I'm liable to tell him that you've bin meetin' Black Jack Bedford the nights you fetch your mother here to say her locoed prayers at that horse thief's grave. I'll tell him how I happened to cut your sign when you was ridin' here to meet that big, purty-lookin' Hatchet ramrod. Or was it this MacLeod feller you was comin' to meet? Though he'd make pore kissin' with his face beat up thataway. Anyhow, Mona, you shore led us to our wolf meat.

"I got it all figgered out. MacLeod is one of Black Jack's new gun-fighters. Pete Jimson jumped the three of 'em and got two outa the three before he got cut down in the fight. And unless Rail Maxwell's changed his ways, he shore ain't takin' up no fight for a Hatchet gun-slinger, even if you are stuck on him. Now let's you and me ride along. The boys will take good care of this Morgan MacLeod. If his horse balks under that big sycamore tree and his ketch rope gits tangled around his neck and hung up on that sycamore limb then it'll be a sorry accident. Your mammy kin plant him alongside Bob Hale—"

Mona swung her horse against Bert Cutter's mount. The shot-loaded rawhide quirt that she swung by its wrist loop caught Bert Cutter across his leering mouth three times before he could throw up his arm. The lashing rawhide left raw, livid welts across his face. The last time she swung, the quirt caught him across the eyes. He let out a sharp cry of pain.

Mona Maxwell reined her horse around and jerked the gun from inside her flannel blouse. Before anybody could get near enough to her to grab the gun she shot in the air six times, as fast as she could thumb back the hammer and pull the trigger.

"That'll fetch every Maxwell cowpuncher in the country!" her voice sounded sharply through the fading echoes of the gun. She whirled her horse and rode off at a lope, taking the wagon road that led to town.

DEPUTY SHERIFF CUTTER cursed the girl but he made no move to stop her or follow her. He spat blood and his eyes were already swelling. His rage was as dangerous as that of a madman, but his tough gun-toters were more amused than angry at the girl who had so completely humiliated the glory-hunting deputy.

"Take this damned snake down to the sycamore and string him up!" snarled Cutter. "I'll learn that little red-maned hellcat a lesson that'll hold 'er for keeps. If she'd bin a man . . . !"

But Mona Maxwell wasn't a man. She was Rail Maxwell's daughter, and she had the backing of every cowman and cowpuncher in Hondo Basin. Those six shots would fetch riders here to investigate the signal. If they were going to hang the prisoner they'd better get the job done right now and then hightail it for the safety of the timbered rim.

One of the men fetched Morgan's horse and he was lifted roughly into the saddle, his hands tied behind his back. The men worked swiftly under Cutter's curses. They led Morgan's horse down to the big sycamore, and one of them dropped the

noose of a saddle rope over his head and threw the end over the low limb where Bob Hale had been found hanging by Rail Maxwell's wife. None of them were relishing this lynching job in broad daylight. They knew that Bert Cutter's law-badge carried no real authority here in Hondo Basin. This was cold-blooded, premeditated murder, and they had no stomach for the grisly job in daylight.

The man with the rope fumbled the job of tying it to the tree limb. Bert Cutter cursed and took over the ugly task himself. His eight men got in one another's way as they rode around their eyes shifting nervously, their ears strained.

"They're comin'!" called one of the men.

Bert Cutter finished tying the rope to the tree limb. Trickles of sweat coursed down his livid face. He rode in behind Morgan's horse. Pulling one foot from his stirrup, he swung his leg out and raked Morgan's horse down the rump with his spur rowel.

The horse snorted and lunged forward. The rope around Morgan's neck jerked tight. The horse jumped out from under him and he was dangling in the air. Hanged by the neck from the limb.

The hard twist rope was strangling him. He fought to free his hands as his legs bent upward at the knees. His senses whirled into pin-wheel blackness.

"Let's go!" barked Cutter, and he raked his horse with his spurs. He quit the place with his horse on a run and his men rode close behind him.

But Morgan MacLeod neither saw nor heard them go . . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Morgan Buys a War

HE DID not see Mona Maxwell ride under the tree limb with his open jack-knife in her hand. She slashed desperately at the taut rope with the blade as Morgan's legs kicked convulsively, and her horse reared and snorted and tried to whirl and run. She was sobbing when the last hempen strand parted with a snap. Morgan MacLeod dropped to the ground with a heavy thud and Mona flung herself from the saddle, her hands yanking the tight noose from around the hanged man's neck.

Morgan's face was blackish purple and his tongue was thick between his teeth. His sightless eyes were open.

The girl's hands rubbed the deep rope indentation around the cowboy's neck. There were no tears in her eyes but her breath came in lung bursting sobs as she worked desperately to bring the hanged man back to life.

And that was how Rail Maxwell found them as he rode up, his horse dripping with sweat and blowing hard, his gun gripped in his big fist.

He saw part of the dangling rope tied to the tree limb, the other half of the severed rope lying on the ground, his red-haired daughter working with frantic desperation to bring some signs of life into the hanged man.

"It was Bert Cutter!" Mona Maxwell said as her father bent over the hanged man. "Cutter, and eight Circle J deputies."

Blair and Holt Maxwell and some armed cowpunchers rode up and Rail Maxwell gave them their orders.

"Cutter's hung the MacLeod feller. They got a head start. Watch out they don't bushwhack yuh. Git after 'em, men! Ride like hell!"

He carried Morgan to the creek bank and they worked over him for quite a while before Morgan began to breathe heavily and his eyes blinked open.

"Damned if you ain't shore hard to kill, young feller!" said Rail Maxwell.

Morgan sat up slowly on the ground and Rail Maxwell gave him a big drink

of whiskey from a leather covered pint flask. He felt gingerly of his neck and his voice, when he tried to speak, was no more than a croaking whisper. His neck was aching and stiff and he hardly tasted the raw whiskey. He tried to grin at Mona. The effect was for the most part ghastly.

"Don't," she told him. "Here's your knife. It came in handy. And I hope I don't have to ever look at another hanged man. No wonder it wrecked my mother's mind. Your face was sort of skinned up to start with, and your hide was black and your tongue out, and I had to pull down your eyelids with my hands. Here's that gun you gave me. It fetched Rail and the boys."

"Every time I meet this feller he's got another dead 'un laid out on the ground. Now don't tell me you shot young Pete Jimson while you was knocked out. Because Henry Lampkin's story of ketchin' fish on dry land still holds the Hondo record. Take another swaller of this corn likker, MacLeod. You look like you need it."

Rail Maxwell's tone was almost friendly, and Mona was wetting his silk neck handkerchief in the creek and handing it to him.

"Mebbyso you got a bellyful of trouble this time, MacLeod," said Rail Maxwell. "You'll be willin' to clear outa Hondo Basin."

"What kind of a quittin' mongrel yellow hound do you take me for, mister? croaked Morgan. "I'm playin' Bob Hale's string out."

"You shore are," chuckled Rail Maxwell, handling the cut saddle rope that had hanged Morgan. He turned to his daughter.

"He's yourn, Mona. You cut him down. He ain't much to look at but nobody kin say he's lackin' in nerve. What you aim to do about 'im!"

"When you can't kill a man off," she said, "the only thing left to do is throw in with him. He'll do for you to take along, Rail."

"That settles it, young feller—you're hired! Mona, trot along to the cabin and rustle some grub. The boys will be back directly, I reckon."

Then Rail Maxwell waited till she was beyond earshot before he continued. "I dont' mind admittin' the fact that we kin use a fightin' man. The Jimsons bushwhacked four men last night up on the rim. And the Hatchet cowpunchers killed off some sheep guards and scattered three-four bands of woollies for the lions or coyotes to feed on. Black Jack Bedford won't throw in with us Hondo Basin fellers, but he's cuttin' and slashin' on the sheep outfits. And if ever it comes to the law-courts, it'll be us that git blamed for the sheep-killin's. Mark my word for it right now. There's goin' to be a war to the finish, and it'll go down in Arizona history as the Maxwell-Jimson Cattle War!"

RAIL MAXWELL'S voice was tinged with bitterness. He had preached peace to his sons and to the cattlemen of Hondo Basin. But Black Jack Bedford was like a black wolf with a pack at his heels. Before sunrise he had led a bunch of picked men on half a dozen swift, deadly raids. They had wiped out the Circle J sheep guards, run off the herders and scattered the defenseless sheep in the timbered Sagitaria Mountains for the wolves, coyotes and mountain lions to destroy.

Meanwhile, Old Man Jimson and his two oldest sons were carrying on a deadly bushwhacking warfare of their own. They rode singly or together and did their killing from the brush. They had shot down the men Rail Maxwell had sent up to the rim to act as scouts for the cattlemen before those punchers could ride back to the Maxwell ranch with news that half a dozen bands of sheep were swarming

down the slopes into the Hondo Basin.

Deputy Sheriff Bert Cutter and his picked gun-toters had ridden down from the rim to contact Pete Jimson at the Bob Hale place and act as advance guard for the approaching bands of sheep. Pete Jimson had ridden ahead, playing Injun. He had killed two Hatchet men and started back to the rim before Black Jack Bedford had killed him.

Cutter had come too far ahead, either by accident or by cunning, cowardly design, to avoid direct battle with the Hatchet riders, and had failed to protect the moving sheep camps. The sheepmen over in Apache County had hired Cutter to protect their sheep and Cutter had failed to earn his fighting pay.

"I've seen one such war down in Texas," said Rail Maxwell. "Seen it wipe out whole families. Men, wimmen and even kids. That's why I pulled out down there when Blair and Holt was just big enough to set a horse and Mona was a baby. I located here in Hondo Basin to settle down in peace. My wife called it Peaceful Valley. And it was peaceful enough for a few years, even when Jimson moved in with his squaw and his half-breed sons.

"Was the Hatchet outfit here then?" Morgan MacLeod asked.

"Yeah. They tried to run us little fellers out, but I wasn't of a mind to be run out no more. I organized the ranchers and told Black Jack Bedford that we aimed to stay where we'd located here, and we'd fight if we was crowded to it. Bedford pulled in his horns and quit his dirt pawin' and bellerin'.

"Me'n Old Man Jimson was never friends. I never trusted him. I told my two boys to stay clear of him and his three breed sons. And they did. Regardless of what any man says about my two boys and the Jimson boys throwin' in together to rustle Hatchet cattle, Blair and Holt never went with 'em on ary of their rustler shindavvys over on the Hatchet range.

The old cattleman's eyes glinted. "The Hatchet cowpunchers dealt us misery. If my outfit whittled on the Hatchet cattle it was no more than the Hatchet was doin' to our stock. But we didn't throw in with ary other outfit to steal from the Hatchet. And if Bob Hale was alive now he'd back me up in what I'm tellin' you. I'm tellin' you because you belonged to the Texas Rangers and you keep an outside contact with the law. Mebbyso you'll live to carry out the real story of the Hondo Basin War.

"Black Jack Bedford is the Hatchet ramrod. He works for wages and it's in his contract with the Hatchet owners back East that he can't own ary cattle or can't have a brand recorded in his name. That was to keep him from stealin' cattle from the Hatchet to put into his own iron. Lots of big outfits have that rule."

"I ain't takin' no oath that Black Jack Bedford throwed in with the Jimsons. But Bob Hale told me not more than a week before he was hung that he had proof that Black Jack was driftin' unbranded stuff off the Hatchet range and droppin' them unbranded cattle where the Jimson boys could pick 'em up and put 'em in the Jimson Cross X iron."

"So Bob was learnin' too fast and too much for his own good?" Morgan MacLeod put in.

"He was. They found out that Bob had sighted 'em workin' those cattle. I'd had a run-in with Old Man Jimson at Hondo and Bob Hale sided my boys in the fight and a couple of Hatchet men got killed. Bedford claimed that Bob Hale killed them Hatchet men. But I was too busy swappin' lead with Old Man Jimson to see what went on.

"Pete Jimson sold them Cross X cattle and fergot to give Black Jack Bedford his cut. Old Man Jimson backed Pete's play. And he said he'd fetch Richardson sheep in here and sheep us all out."

RAIL MAXWELL was silent for a moment, and Morgan was thinking. Presently he asked, "Who swore out the warrant for Bob Hale on that horse stealin' charge?"

The old cattleman shrugged. "Quien sabe? Bert Cutter come after him. And in the shuffle Bob Hale got hung. The hangin' was done while I was in the Prescott hospital where the doctors was yankin' Old Man Jimson's bullets outa my hide and my two boys was on the roundup at the upper end of the Hondo Basin.

"Richardson is the head of the Sheepmen's Association, and he's foolish enough to trust the Jimsons to protect his sheep. Cutter's reppin' for Richardson. Cutter and his men was a long ways off between midnight and daylight when the Hatchet riders wiped out them sheep camps. Which might mean that Bert Cutter has sold out the sheepmen and is takin' secret orders from Black Jack Bedford. That's just a cowman's guess, and your guess is as good as mine."

Then Rail Maxwell's voice lowered as he took a step toward Morgan. "Here's what I'm gittin' down to, MacLeod: The Jimsons are out to hang Maxwell hides on the fence. I don't trust Black Jack Bedford one way or the other. I've told him I'd shoot him on sight if ever I ketched him talkin' to my daughter Mona. So I'm scared to trust any man outside of my two sons and the few honest cowment in the Hondo Basin who're ridin' with Blair and Holt right now. That makes mebbyso a dozen men all told that I kin trust. Cutter has eight men, so Mona says. Then there's the Jimsons, and Black Jack Bedford and his Hatchet crew. So if you throw in with the Maxwells, MacLeod, you're fightin' on the side that has the odds piled high ag'in 'em."

"I wouldn't fight on any other side, mister," said Morgan. "I'm proud to throw in with you."

"We're buckin' the sheepmen and Cutter," Rail Maxwell counted the odds off on his fingers, "We're fightin' the bushwhackin' Jimsons. And like as not we've got Black Jack Bedford and his Hatchet outfit to whup. Better cut your string and git outa Hondo Basin. This ain't your fight, young feller."

"Bob Hale was my pardner. His daddy raised me. I reckon that pays for the few white chips I'm buyin the game."

Rail Maxwell nodded. Blair and Holt and the others were showing up now and Rail told them to bury the three men.

Smoke came from the cabin chimney and Mona showed in the doorway. She pounded on a big dishpan with a wooden spoon.

"Grub pile!" she called "Come and git 'er, or I'll throw 'er away!"

"Blair," said Rail Maxwell, "you and Holt kin shake hands with Morgan MacLeod. Mona kinda mavericked him and she says he'll do to take along. Hell, there's nothin' else to do but call him Morg and listen to him tell how he's the only man in Arizona Territory that ever got hung, then lived to take the trail of the sons that put that rope-burn necktie around his windpipe. And how he killed three men after he was knocked out."

The Maxwell outfit ate his grub and hoorawed him about his hanging. They called him Morg, and he was now one of that little band of cowmen who were so out-numbered that their cause looked hopeless. War was now declared. There would be no quarter asked, none given. He was in this war that was to go down in Arizona history as the Maxwell-Jimson Feud—the Hondo Basin Cattle War.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Last Hope Stand-Off

BLACK JACK BEDFORD and a bunch of hand-picked, tough cowpunchers, heavily armed and riding the

fastest horses in the Hatchet remuda, were in the saddle from dusk until the crack of dawn. They struck with the vicious, swift ferocity of a wolf pack.

Two bands of sheep were mixed and then driven to death over a high cliff under the rim of the Sagitarias. The Mexican herders were scared off. The armed men, hired by Bert Cutter to protect the invading sheep hands, were killed or run off, the tents and beds destroyed.

Back beyond the Sagitarias bunches of wild horses and cattle were driven back and forth through the shallow lakes where the oncoming bands of sheep were expecting to water. The black mud of the lake bottom was churned up and the water so fouled that the sheep would not drink. Half the sheep died of thirst on the way back to clear water.

The sheep invasion was proving a failure. Richardson and the other sheepmen had made a costly and fatal mistake, for the Sagitaria Mountains and the Hondo Basin was cow country. And it would remain a cow country as long as there were cattlemen left alive to fight for it.

The trail bands of sheep had turned and were taking the back trail to their home range. The lead bands had been killed or so scattered that it was only a matter of days until they were finished off by prowling varmints. The sheep invasion of Hondo Basin had proved a dismal, costly, fatal mistake. Richardson and his sheepmen were tallying their losses.

But the war in Hondo Basin and on the rim of the Sagitarias was only begun. Old Man Jimson was smarting from defeat. He had lost his youngest son. The old wolf of the Sagitarias was not one to crawl back into his hole to lick his wounds. He remembered that he had sworn to wipe out the Maxwells, and a stranger named Morgan MacLeod. For Cutter had told him that MacLeod was the man who had killed young Pete Jimson.

"I had him hung," Cutter told Old Man Jimson. "The Maxwells cut 'im down. MacLeod claims to have been Bob Hale's pardner."

"Take them hired hands of yourn, Cutter, and slip back into Hondo Basin. Kill MacLeod and the Maxwells where you find 'em. Sam and Jake is on the prowl down yonder a'ready. The next time you come back a-whinin' and bellyachin', Cutter, I'll gut-shoot yuh. Git outa my sight!"

Then to his two-half breed sons Old Man Jimson gave curt, grim instruction: "Shoot 'em where their suspenders cross!"

Bert Cutter sent out notice what outlaws call "the rustling of the leaves."

"Tell them renegades," the gun notching deputy instructed his several messengers, "that if they string their bets with me they can't lose. We'll take the Hondo Basin and claim it for ourselves. We'll wipe out the Maxwells and we'll kill off the Jimsons. And before we're done we'll have Black Jack Bedford beggin' fer mercy and meetin' us on our own terms. I'll use this badge to make us all rich."

Thus spoke the badge-polishing killer who bragged that he had ridden with Billy the Kid in New Mexico's bloody Lincoln County War. And his following increased almost over night.

They made a swift night raid on the little town of Hondo and came away with kegs of whiskey and gunnysacks filled with grub which they took from Henry Lampkin's store. They shot up the town and left the litttle storekeeper lying beat-

A good bet for sure-fire fiction enjoyment is to reserve next month's great Anniversary Issue of *Dime Western* now! It features a new, smashing Walt Coburn novel, another novel by Cliff Farrell, plus thrilling frontier novelettes and short stories! On sale everywhere December 1st!

en and unconscious in his own blood behind the counter of his store.

The saloonkeeper had put up a fight and they had killed him and helped themselves to all the booze they could carry away. They butchered a Maxwell beef and got drunk. When tangled in a snarling dog fight, Bert Cutter took advantage of the brawling to kill off three men whom he feared might try to take away his leadership.

Old Man Jimson and his two half-breed sons laid low. When the sign was right they rode into Bert Cutter's camp under the rim of the Sagitarias.

"Right now is the time," Old Man Jimson told Cutter who was the only cold sober man in camp, "to ride down to the Maxwell ranch and wipe 'em out. Git your men a-straddle of their horses!"

MONA Maxwell rode a sweat dripping played-out horse from the little cowtown of Hondo to the Maxwell ranch in the dark hours before dawn. Her face was chalk-white and her eyes were dark with grief and a bitter hatred.

"My mother's dead—murdered! Cutter and his renegades shot up town tonight and when she ran into the street Bert Cutter shot her down. They killed the saloonman, and Henry Lampkin's wife is trying to nurse him back to life. They killed the two cowpunchers you left in town with mother and me. Like as not they'll attack the ranch before daylight. There must be twenty-five or thirty men with Bert Cutter."

There was a bullet rip in the girl's arm. She had a six-shooter belted around her slim waist and also packed a carbine. She had made a running fight to get out of the raided town.

Besides Rail Maxwell, his two sons and Morgan MacLeod there were four men at the Maxwell ranch.

"Looks like showdown's comin'." Rail Maxwell's voice was steady. "We'll make our stand-off here, boys. You don't need no orders from me because you already know what to do."

His big hands were gentle as a woman's as he dressed the bullet tear in Mona's arm. She kissed him and picked up her carbine. Rail Maxwell's red-haired daughter was as game as any man in the log cabin. When the fight came she would handle a gun like the rest of them.

Heavy shutters were fastened over the cabin windows and there were loopholes for the guns. There was a full moon that lighted up the barns and corrals and gave the barricaded fighters the advantage over any attacking party. Boxes of cartridges were opened and there was an ample supply of extra guns. They had grub and water for a siege, and they could easily pick off any man who tried to break into the nearby barn for their saddled horses.

As the drank coffee and waited, Mona Maxwell told them of the shooting-up of Hondo by Cutter and his renegade pack.

SHE told of her mother's death, briefly and in a tone of voice that made Morgan's heart ache because it was steady and calm and tearless.

"She saw Bert Cutter from the window of the Lampkin house. She must have seen him that evening when she found Bob Hale hanging to the tree limb because she pulled me to the window.

"'That's the man who hanged Bob!' she pointed at Cutter. He was sitting his horse at the hitchrack in front of the saloon. They had set fire to the saloon by then, and the light from the fire made everything bright.

"She was more sane then than she's been since that day her mind snapped. Before I could guess what she was going to do she ran out the door and across the street with her Bible in her hand. I heard her as she called him Bob Hale's murderer. Then he shot her.

"I ran out of the house with a six-

shooter, but Bert Cutter got away in the crowd. Nobody said anything when I picked mother up and carried her back into the house.

"She had been shot through the heart. I put her on her bed and covered her and put her Bible in her hands. Then I slipped out the back way and got my horse. Somebody shot at me. It might have been Cutter. I kept going. They were getting ready to quit town then. Mother's murder had sobered them I guess. If they had been men, they'd have killed Bert Cutter. But there were men with him who had helped hang Bob Hale and they let him get away before I could kill him. I won't miss if I sight him."

"None of us will miss him if we line our sights on him," said big Rail Maxwell quietly. "Now drink this coffee, baby."

"Yonder they come, Rail," said one of the watchers. "Looks like a whole damn army spreadin' out and circlin' like Injuns. Beyond gun range. Old Man Jimson's ramrodin' that layout, the way they're usin' Injun tricks."

Big Rail Maxwell was the last man on earth Morgan MacLeod expected to hear make a prayer. But in the hush that had fallen over the room, the big bearded cattleman's deep, soft voice sounded and he stood by the barred door, his carbine in the crook of his arm. Hatless, his heavy shock of graying hair and beard gave him a biblical mien.

"May God Almighty have mercy on those of us that die here! Protect my sons and my little girl and the men in this cabin who are brave enough to share our dangers. You know, God, how I've tried to live peaceful. But now that our enemies is crowdin' us, give us the strength to out-fight the men that murdered the mother of my children. Amen."

"Amen," they chorused, their voices hushed. And their eyes went back to their gun sights as they peered through the cabin loopholes.

"Hold your fire, boys, till they come up in range," Rail Maxwell told them. "Then shoot to kill. You 'tend to the coffee and the ca'tridges, Mona. Leave the gun work to the men. There's enough of us, I reckon, to git the job done."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Backs to the Wall!

BERT CUTTER'S renegades were drunk on corn whiskey and the promises he had given them. Drunk enough to disregard caution and charge the cabin from all sides. And as that circle of gunfighters spurred their horses at the cabin, yelling and shooting, the men inside opened fire.

They shot as fast as they could work the levers of their carbines and pull the triggers. They shot fast and straight. And through the deafening roar of their guns sounded Rail Maxwell's big, booming voice: "Steady, men! Shoot to kill!"

It was kill or get killed, and the men in the cabin fought with cool nerved desperation. They shot riders from their saddles and saw the horses swerve and whirl and go tearing off into the moonlight, the stirrups of the empty saddles swinging and slapping. And those of the attackers who survived that wild, drunken charge raced for the safety of the brush.

More than half a dozen men had been shot from their saddles. Four of them lay in sprawled, motionless heaps on the moonlit ground. The others crawled and lurched back towards the shelter of the brush, and the men in the cabin let them go. Others had been wounded but had managed to stay in their saddles as they spurred for the safety of the brush.

After that, only the pain-racked cursing and moaning of the wounded could be heard in that silence.

Save for the faint glow that came from coals in the big stone fireplace, the cabin

was in darkness. The air was thick with powdersmoke. One of the men, a rancher neighbor of the Maxwells, was slumped in a motionless heap on the floor beneath his porthole, hit square between the eyes by a chance bullet. Rail Maxwell covered the dead man with a blanket and told Holt to pass the jug around. They needed a drink, he said, to wash the powdersmoke out of their throats.

Mona filled tin cups with black coffee. When she filled Morgan's cup he grinned his thanks, and she forced a smile as their eyes met in the dim red glow of the fire.

He wanted to tell her that she was a lot braver than any man here in the cabin but he knew it would sound foolish. He spiked his coffee from the whiskey jug and his eyes went back to watch through the porthole.

"Cutter's renegades won't try that trick no more,"—said Rail Maxwell. "Old Man Jimson'll try some Injun trick the next time. Keep your eyes peeled."

The waiting was harder on their nerves than fighting. Then four men tried to make the short, fast ride from the brush to the barn while the others raked the cabin with a sudden burst of gunfire.

Blair Maxwell and a cowpuncher who worked for the outfit had a plain view of them and their carbines roared. They knocked two of the men from their saddles. A third man clung to the saddle horn, swaying drunkenly as his horse carried him back to the shelter of the brush. The fourth man lay along his horse's neck and rode back the way he had come.

THE heavy shutters had not been thick enough to stop some of the rifle bullets and Holt Maxwell had been hit in the leg. He ripped the leg of his overalls and heavy under drawers with the blade of his jack-knife and Mona fastened a tourniquet above the wound and bandaged it with a cool dexterity that won Morgan's unspoken admiration.

"Cuss if it'll help you any, Holt," she told her brother. "I know most of the words anyhow."

Holt Maxwell forced a grin. "Where'd you ever hear 'em?"

"From you and Blair when you had to mind me as a baby. Here's the jug of pain-killer, cowboy. Has anybody sighted Bert Cutter?"

None of them had caught even a short glimpse of the burly, glory-hunter, but they had heard his voice more than once as he bellowed profane orders to his renegades. Cutter was staying under cover. Any man in the cabin would have gladly given his life for a chance to put a bullet through the heart of the murderer who had shot Rail Maxwell's wife.

When Mona had fetched the news of her mother's death, Rail Maxwell's face had lost its ruddy, healthy glow and the skin that showed above his bushy beard had taken on a grayish pallor. Rail Maxwell was blaming himself for her death and for the danger that now closed in like a circle of death on them all. He would gladly have thrown open the door and walked out there and let them shoot him down if it would save the lives of his daughter and two stalwart sons and the staunch friends who had refused to desert him in the face of almost certain disaster. But there was nothing Rail Maxwell or any of them could do.

They were barricaded in the log cabin. They could stand a week's siege here if need be. It would take ten times the number of men out yonder to charge the cabin and take it by force.

There was only one way for Cutter and the Jimsons actually to wipe them out, and that was with fire. And that would be Old Man Jimson's way when Cutter and his drunken renegades were done with their useless charging around.

Old Man Jimson and his two big half-breed sons had probably not yet fired a shot. They weren't wasting good cart-

ridges shooting at the log walls and heavy shutters of a cabin. They wanted human targets when they lined their gun-sights.

But the cabin and barn and corrals were in the middle of a clearing and there was no way of setting fire to the heavy log walls. Not until a wind stirred the still night air.

Rail Maxwell and every man in the cabin dreaded the coming of dawn when there was likely to be enough of a breeze to pull the blaze from fired brush to the cabin. With enough of a wind, a brush fire would travel across the dry grass to catch the piles of cordwood and lean-to shed behind the cabin. Then the hungry flames would catch the dry log walls. So they watched the tree tops for sign of that dreaded breeze that meant flaming death to them all.

THE shooting out yonder had ceased, filling the besieged people in the cabin with tense uneasiness. Old Man Jimson had an Injun trick of some kind up his sleeve. They knew that.

Sounds came from behind the blacksmith shop and wagon shed and the hay corrals where stood the stacks of hay. Off in the east daylight was graying the ragged skyline of the Sagitarias. Rail Maxwell, staring through his slotted loophole saw the tops of the trees sway gently with the first stirring of the early dawn breeze. He read the singal for their doom.

Mona Maxwell sensed the reason for the heavy silence that had fallen like a pall over the men in the cabin. They were all crouched against the walls, carbine barrels shoved through the loopholes. Watching. Waiting.

Then something moved from behind the hay corrals. It came toward the cabin with sluggish slowness that gathered speed as it came down the slight incline. It was a partly loaded hay wagon, being pushed backward by men who held the wagon tongue. They had greased the four wheels and torn the heavier part of the wagon away, leaving only the skeleton frame of the hayrack with its bulky load of dry hay, which hid and sheltered the men who were pushing it. Smoke and a flicker or two of yellow flame now came from it. In a few minutes those greased wheels would roll the burning load against the cabin wall.

Mona Maxwell picked up a carbine and shoved it through one of the loopholes. She fired three shots in rapid succession. Her voice, through the echoes of the shots, counted slowly up to ten. Then she fired three more shots.

She stood back and reloaded the magazine of the carbine. There was a faint, grim smile on her face that showed in the red glow of the coals in the big stone fireplace. Her eyes shone darkly.

Not even her father asked her why she had fired those signal shots, yet every man there knew that it must be some kind of sign of desperate distress. And that help could come from only one source—Black Jack Bedford and his Hatchet cowpunchers.

The wagon with its load of blazing hay came on toward the cabin with increasing speed. They opened up with a heavy gunfire but the load of fire came on with a relentless speed. The hayrack, a mass of fire, thudded against the back shed. Then men behind it were hidden by the wall of black smoke and crimson-yellow flames.

The crackling of the flames penetrated the thick log walls as the bone-dry slabs that formed the lean-to shed ignited. It was only a matter of minutes now until their log-walled barricade would be a blazing inferno. They were caught in a fire trap. They would have to stay here and be burned alive or get shot down as they quit the cabin and ran for their horses at the barn!

Out yonder in the brush Old Man Jimson and his two half-breed sons were waiting, their carbines ready. Bert Cutter

was shouting hoarse orders to his men to lay low and take 'er easy. That they had the Maxwells a-roastin', an' to let the Jimsons git their bear meat.

Then beyond the circle of Cutter's renegades and the bushed-up Jimsons came a shout that was as clear as a bugle call.

"Take to 'em, you curly wolves! Git 'em, you Hatchet sons! Git them sheep-stinkin' sons of coyotes!"

That was Black Jack Bedford's war whoop, and the yip-yipping of his hard-riding, quick-triggered Hatchet cowpunchers caught up his yell as they rode in a closing circle at the Cutter outlaws. They were shooting as they spurred their horses through the brush and trees.

THE chinking between the logs of the rear wall was burning away and dropping in chunks. Flames licked in through the logs and filled the cabin with smoke. The heat was unbearable.

Rail Maxwell slid back the heavy bar. His voice sounded through the outside gunfire and the increasing roar of the fire that was now devouring the log cabin.

"I'm goin' out first. Holt, you and Blair take Mona out. Morg, you and the other men foller them. If my two boys git shot down, take care of Mona the best you know how. And may God have mercy on us all!"

Rail Maxwell flung the door open and stalked out into the open. His big voice roared a last challenge to Old Man Jimson.

"If you ain't a damned coward, Jimson, step out and fight like a man!"

He stood out there alone in the red glow of the burning cabin like some big granite monument of frontier bravery. His carbine gripped in his big hands, was raised just above the level of his belt. His big legs widespread. There was something so magnificent about his courage that no bushwhacked gun took advantage of the giant target.

Old Man Jimson did the one thing that forever balanced the scales of his past misdeeds. Tall, gaunt and gray, the old timber wolf of the Jimsons stepped out into plain view from behind a brush patch. Then Rail Maxwell and Old Man Jimson were shooting at one another. Standing out in the open and their carbines were spewing fire.

"Holt! Blair!" Morgan's voice cracked like a pistol in the ears of Rail Morgan's two stalwart red-headed sons. "Take Mona! Run! Rail is givin' you your chance! Git the hell gone!"

They took their sister between them and ran for the brush. And before they had gone ten feet Black Jack Bedford and four of his cowpunchers came at them, their horses spurred to a dead run.

Bullets snarled around them and one of the Hatchet men was shot from his saddle. Then Black Jack reached them and slid his horse to a halt. He reached down and swung Mona up behind him and raced for the brush.

Morgan saw Rail Maxwell and Old Man Jimson go down under each other's gunfire. He saw Holt Maxwell trying to run, limping badly on account of his wounded leg. Blair helping him now, refusing to leave his twin brother behind. The Hatchet men had ridden off with Black Jack and the girl. Blair caught the trailing bridle reins of a riderless Hatchet horse. He heaved Holt into the saddle and vaulted up behind.

Morgan and the three cowmen quit the cabin and started their zigzag run for safety. One of them was shot down. Morgan felt a bullet tear into his shoulder like a hot branding iron. He faltered a step or two and kept running. Blair Maxwell rode from the brush on the Hatchet horse and picked Morgan off the ground without checking the horse slower than a lope. Holt had another horse, and while the Hatchet men were riding down Cutter's renegades, he rode out and gathered one

of the other men who had been in the cabin with the Maxwells. The man's partner dove into the shelter of the brush.

Morgan swung from behind Blair and scrambled into the saddle of a riderless horse that belonged to one of Cutter's men who had been killed. He charged off through the brush, his left arm dangling, his slitted eyes watching for Cutter.

Blair and Holt Maxwell were riding together. They, too, were hunting for the man who had murdered their mother. They rode, instead, into the two Jimson brothers. Morgan saw them all shooting at the same time, their horses rearing and lunging and whirling.

Then Morgan caught sight of Bert Cutter.

THE stocky gunman badge-toter was riding straight toward a little open space between the brush where Black Jack Bedford lay with one leg held down by the heavy weight of the horse that had been shot from under him. Bedford had been dazed by the fall and was making desperate, futile efforts to reload his empty six-shooter while Mona Maxwell was trying, with frantic pulling, to free his broken leg from under the dead horse.

They saw Cutter coming at them and there was murder in the renegade deputy's slitted bloodshot eyes. Then Morgan MacLeod rode at Cutter.

He yelled, and Cutter's head jerked sideways toward him. His glittering eyes recognized Morgan and his gun spewed fire. The bullet nicked Morgan's ribs, and he shot twice at Cutter, the two heavy slugs striking the killer's thick chest. Cutter's horse whirled and bolted. The heavy set deputy swayed drunkenly in the saddle, his face twisted with pain.

Blair and Holt Maxwell rode out of the brush and they sighted Cutter at the same instant. Their guns roared and Cutter slumped forward across the horn.

Blair spurred his horse alongside. His long arm dragged Cutter's bullet-riddled body from the saddle and threw it in front of him across the saddle horn. With Holt riding close behind he loped out to where Rail Maxwell, mortally wounded, lay propped on one elbow. Blair dumped Bert Cutter's lifeless body on the ground.

"Here's the murderin' skunk, Rail!"

A grin twisted Rail Maxwell's bearded lips as his two big red-haired sons, both bleeding from bullet wounds, swung from their saddles. They propped him to a sitting position on the ground. He was dying, but he grinned at Morgan.

Black Jack Bedford's Hatchet cowpunchers had ridden down most of Cutter's renegades, fighting out old hatreds. The fighting was over.

Mona Maxwell had run to her father and her arms held him. She sat down on the ground and Rail Maxwell's shaggy head was pillowed in her lap. Her hands smoothed her father's bearded face before his eyes closed in death.

Morgan MacLeod unbuckled his saddle rope and dropped a loop over the neck of Black Jack Bedford's dead horse. He hauled the horse clear of the man's broken leg. The Hatchet ramrod's eyes lost nothing of their coldness as he nodded grim thanks. The front of his shirt was stained with blood.

Black Jack Bedford's mouth twisted in a sardonic grin. He started to say something and coughed. Blood spilled from his mouth and his handsome black head dropped back on the ground. Death glazed the cold, bleak eyes. Black Jack Bedford, ramrod of the Hatchet outfit, had died game. Died with his boots on.

WHEN they buried Black Jack Bedford and marked the grave with a granite boulder, Mona told Morgan and her brothers that she had never loved the handsome, reckless, cattle-rustling ramrod of the Hatchet outfit. Her meeting him secretly had been at his insistence. She

had been making a girl's desperate attempt to keep Bedford and his Hatchet cowpunchers from making open war on the Maxwells.

Black Jack Bedford had made a grim prophecy that the day would come when her father and brothers would be in a tight and that he would be the one and only power that could save them from destruction. He would come to their aid on only the condition that she would marry him.

When she fired a gun in the signal that meant her acceptance, he and his Hatchet cowpunchers would come on the run with their guns roaring. Thus it had been that she had given that signal of surrender.

All the inside history of that Hondo Basin war will never be told, because dead men tell no tales. That Black Jack Bedford was in cahoots with Bert Cutter was probable, but it never could be proven. That the Hatchet ramrod was behind that sheep invasion and had engineered the whole thing to keep sheep forever from getting a hold into the Sagitarias and Hondo Basin is likewise probable. He had the cunning to foresee the wiping out of the Jimsons, and he hoped that the Maxwells would also be wiped out—all save Mona.

The owners of the Hatchet, when they learned that the outfit was bogged in debt, were only too willing to sell their land and the remnants of their cattle to Morgan MacLeod and the two Maxwell brothers.

The day of the sale, when the papers were signed at Prescott, Mona Maxwell and Morgan MacLeod were married.

So Rail Maxwell and his wife had found peace at last in their graves at the Maxwell ranch. And that peace for which Rail Maxwell had given his life finally came to Hondo Basin. The tale of its coming is told, so far as can be, and the rest lies buried with the men who wrote its sanguine history with blazing guns.

THE END

HELL ON THE HOOF

By L. L. FOREMAN

Spook-'Em crashed against the fence with all the willful premeditation of planned murder. . . .

A tensely exciting, human story of the glory days of the cattle-range, when rival outfits put on bucking contests for the thrill of it—and, sometimes for the life and freedom of a fellow waddy!

WITH his square chin on the corral's top-bar, Pinto Venters looked at the black horse, and the black horse looked at Pinto. Pinto tried to tell himself that this black devil was just another salty outlaw, and that he'd ride it to a finish just as he'd ridden plenty others. But inside himself, he knew better, and so did the horse. It snorted and wheeled away and Pinto back-stepped fast as a lashing hoof cracked wickedly against the bar.

"You an' me," muttered Pinto, picking up his hat, "ain't gonna get along, I can see that!"

He wished the south valley men to blazes for bringing this snaky brute. This Spook-'Em horse just wasn't born to be

ridden. But he was due to make the try this afternoon, regardless. All the north valley looked to him to stay on this Spook 'Em outlaw. It was chiefly a matter of pride, for the south valley bunch were too smug-sure they'd pulled a slick on their old range rivals. Then, too, the entire valley had pooled a prize of four hundred dollars for the first man to stay a full minute on the black. And that counted, too.

In the wide hollow, both north and south valley cowmen joshed together around the fires and round-up wagons. This year they were holding their annual stock meeting on Long Tom Cameron's Jingle Bob range.

Most of the cattle sales had been cleaned up, though goateed little Major Stangton, owner of the neighboring Forked S, was still seeking the owner of five alien-branded beeves he'd sold with a trail herd during the summer. A persistent and grimly honest man, the Major had seventy-five dollars ready to pay out, and he wouldn't close his books until he'd found somebody to pay it to.

He was holding up everything on account of those five cows. That was all right with Pinto, but the crowd was impatient to get started on really serious business. There was a lot of horse-racing to be done, and some earnest piking at three card monte. But, of first importance, north valley craved to show it could produce a man to ride anything on legs that the south valley bunch could drag in.

Buffalo Furl sloched over and stood near Pinto, eyeing the wicked black. He was a newcomer to the valley, and had got a job breaking horses for the Major's Forked S outfit. The Major had considered Furl the logical man to try riding the black, but Long Tom Cameron had overruled him. Long Tom and the Major ran their neighboring north valley outfits in good harmony, but they didn't always see eye-to-eye.

Furl glanced at Pinto, his pale eyes hostile. He drawled, "That goat don't look so much to me. I've rode the rough string plenty. That one's a rockin' chair to some I've rode."

"I've rode a few, m'self," mildly returned Pinto, who had clung to a saddle before he could walk.

"So I've heard," nodded Furl. He added deliberately, "I guess you learned a lot from your father, huh?"

Pinto winced. Valley folks didn't generally mention his father, Ride-Away Venters, bronc-buster and notorious horsethief who had died last year with his reckless smile still on his lips, at the end of a hangrope near Nogales. Pinto wanted to forget those bad old days, and now Long Tom was giving him that chance with an honest riding job.

Furl lounged away, his dark face bitter and saturnine. Pinto gazed after Furl, until a hand pressed on his shoulder.

HE looked around at Slim Travis. Slim, range boss for Long Tom, stood about twice as good as Pinto's idea of what a man should be.

"Forget it, kid,' said Slim, his quiet voice like a cooling salve to Pinto's hot thoughts. "That feller just don't know no better. You keep your mind on that ride, an' don't let nothin' worry you."

It was like Slim, with a gnawing worry of his own, to try to ease another fellow's troubles. Pinto said, a bit haltingly, "Sure, Slim. But that rides' kinda botherin' me, too. That horse is the worst I ever saw. He just ain't human, the spooky cuss!"

He saw Slim's gray eyes take on a faraway look that could mean anything. Slim had that look a lot lately, since his young wife had taken sick. He needed money bad for her operation, and was already up to his neck in debt. Slim said, "We're all bettin' heavy you'll make it. Me, too."

"You? *You* bettin' on me—honest?"

Slim nodded. "I've scraped up ev'ry dime I could—an' shot the works on you, kid. Four hundred dollars. I just now handed it to that gambler from Tombstone, to lay for me at the best odds he could get."

Pinto felt suddenly sick. "I—I'm sure sorry you done that, Slim," he muttered. "I been standin' here lookin' that horse over, an'—an' the more I look, the less I think he can be rode."

Slim's lean face didn't change, only it seemed to Pinto that his deep tan faded out a little. And when Slim finally flashed his grin, it took a close eye to see anything wrong with it. "Mebby you're right," Slim remarked easily. "If you can't ride his, nobody can. But you'll give 'em a show, anyhow. It's tryin' that counts, an' a feller can't do more'n his best. Let's go see if we can hit the cook for some coffee. I'm kinda dry."

They took their stand by the Dutch ovens and played the Jingle Bob coffee pot, biggest in the valley. Slim took his coffee black and unsweetened, but Pinto dipped into the sugar barrel.

Big Jute, the cook, generally didn't allow liberties like that. He was a soured man, always quick to put a cowhand in his place. But he gave the nod to Pinto, who'd never yet squawked on the grub and could always be relied on to rustle up dry wood for the fires. Besides, he had fifty dollars on Pinto to ride that horse.

Furl came up with a mixed crowd of north valley cowmen, and led them in raiding the coffee pot. With a steaming mug in his hand, Furl spread his legs and squinted off at Spook 'Em's tight corral.

"No, sir," he announced, as if he'd been asked. "Me, I ain't bettin' on it. Bet on a kid ridin' that goat? Huh! If 'twas a man, now—a man with the right kind o' blood in him—"

"Pinto can ride," somebody cut in. "Don't let anybody tell you he can't."

"Sure." Furl shrugged and sipped his coffee. "I guess he had enough practice—ridin' 'em with his old man. But I wouldn't risk my money on him, any more'n I'd bet on a wolf-cub guardin' sheep. I still say we oughta pick a growed man we know won't let us down."

PINTO saw Slim's face go wooden. Slim bent and put down his mug, and rose hitching up his belt. But Big Jute was ahead of him. Big Jute levelled an iron ladle as big as his head at Furl, and came stalking past the smoking ovens.

"Git away from that coffee pot, you coffee-swillin' snake 'fore I ding this over your damn skull!" he rumbled.

Furl left, his eyes glinting angrily. The others left him go before they drifted away. As far as north valley was concerned, Pinto was an accepted Jingle Bob hand of nearly a year's standing. And any Jingle Bob man could qualify in any kind of company.

Over by the Forked S wagon, the Major again proclaimed the fact that he had seventy-five dollars which didn't belong to him. "For five beeves branded Bar JH," he ended impatiently.

A rancher just in from Sulphur Springs called out, "Bar JH, you say? Gimme the money, Major. I bought out that brand from Jim Doolin last winter. Want to see my tally book?"

The Major waived the right. From his bag of coin he counted out the seventy-five, and tossed the cowhide cashbag back into his wagon with as little respect as if it had been a sack of corn. It landed with a solid clunk and jingle of hard cash, and the Major snapped the rubber-band around his account book. With business disposed of, he lighted one of his thin cheroots and strolled away.

Pinto, who had never possessed more than forty dollars at one time in his life, gazed with near fascination at that casu-

ally handled cashbag. An awful lot of money had passed in and out of that worn old strip of sewed cowhide. It was as familiar to the valley as the Major's perky little goatee. Most of the hair had long since worn off the pouch, but the Major's brand was burned deep into the hide. Pinto tried guessing how much was in it now. Two or three thousand in gold and silver, likely enough.

He became aware of Slim's faraway gaze, also resting on that cashbag, and wondered what thoughts might be going on behind those level gray eyes. With that much money, Slim could send his wife East for her operation, could get out of debt, and maybe buy up a small brand of his own. Or build a neat little cabin for his wife, instead of having to let her go on living with fussy old Miss Amanda Pink, the schoolma'am, three miles away. Every time Slim rode by some married cowman's place, with its clean curtains and struggling bit of garden, Pinto noticed he looked sort of solemn and thoughtful.

Slim blinked his eyes away from the Major's cashbag, and grinned crookedly at Pinto. "It ain't good to look too long at a thing like that," he observed, and walked off.

Pinto gazed after him. That long-legged son of Texas sure could hold himself in. No bitter envy or futile wishing there, though Slim was no angel. From things he'd let drop once or twice, it was pretty plain he'd ridden a few wild trails before he came to the Jingle Bob and got married.

Big Jute sent up his three-a-day screech. "Eeee-yow! Grub's on!"

Pinto joined the converging crowd and was ahead of most in grabbing for a tin plate. He could be a short jump from disaster, and still have a sharp appetite. In the old wild days, Ride-Away Venters had deplored such an inconvenient trait in his son, but it had amused him to take crazy chances in filling the hungry young stomach while sweating possemen, thirsty and famished, furiously scoured the brush for them. . . .

PINTO ate heartily and came up for more. Slim was nowhere in the earnestly eating crowd, and Pinto marvelled that a man should allow worry to keep him from taking on a load of such good food. Big Jute, for all his snuffy disposition, could rise to the heights of artistry in his trade when special occasion called for the effort.

No corn dodgers and salt pork today. Big Jute had baked up batches of bread as light and white as cotton. Long strips of young beef shoulder, rolled and broiled over hot coals, stood in huge piles on the Dutch ovens. He'd bought cases of dried fruits, and concocted stewed dishes and fluff-duffs that put a happy glow into the eater's eyes. His baked potatoes practically exploded at a touch; his frijole beans, plain and with black-strap, bore no relation to everyday Mex strawberries; and the coffee was strong enough to do housework.

The gambler from Tombstone ate with the south valley bunch. The prospect of horse racing and monte had called him in as an uninvited but accepted guest. He was a big man, with a cool eye and the deceptively mild manners of his kind, but it was his diamonds and cream-white shirt that drew Pinto's silent respect.

"Who," politely queried the gambler, handing around a fat silver flask, " is the gentleman that's going to break his neck riding that black demon?"

Nobody answered. The north valley men exchanged looks and grinned. They were keeping it quiet until the time came. It was going to be a joke when they produced a stripling boy who'd ride the dynamite out of south valley's prize man-killer.

The Tombstone gambler, with the air

of one who had blundered, murmured apologetically, "I was just curious. I'm holding considerable betting money on the thing."

"They can all take a crack at it if they want," drily put in a south valley cowman. "But my money's still on the horse!"

A rider, coming at a brisk lope into the hollow, pulled the attention of the crowd. Pinto rose, shading his eyes against the pouring brilliance of the high sun. "It's Dud Ormley, the feller Miss Pink hired to build her a stock fence," he said. "Must be he's come 'count o' Slim's wife. Hey, Slim!"

Slim appeared from somewhere, running to meet the rider. They spoke briefly. Slim borrowed the horse and saddle, and took off fast out of the hollow. Dud Ormley came on afoot over to the crowd.

"Slim's wife, she's sorta nervous," he explained. "Miss Amanda tried to get her to sleep, but she's frettin' for Slim. I guess she's pretty sick. Miss Amanda's gonna raise fits, the way Slim's ridin' that pet mare o' hers."

Big Jute began telling off those he expected to help him with the dirty dishes, and that broke up the after-dinner loafing. A bunch had already started a monte game. The Tombstone gambler looked on for awhile, saw no profit in it, and sauntered off. Pinto went and took another dubious survey of Spook 'Em, who met his troubled look with a sinister eye.

"Snaky cuss, he's got the Injun sign on me an' he knows it!" muttered Pinto. It was the first time he had ever feared a horse. "I know dang well he's gonna unload me an' kick my face out through the back o' my head! Gosh, I wish Slim hadn't bet!"

He frowned, realizing in what a short while they'd be calling for him to ride.

HE doubted if there was a single north valley man, outside of Furl, who wasn't betting on him. They considered him the best and gamest bronc rider in Arizona. Well, they'd haul down that high opinion of him today, and he was due to cut a sorry figure from here on. No help for it!

Pinto decided he'd better double-rig his saddle, and went off to do it. Slim, he knew, generally carried a spare cincha in his war-bag, tied up in his bedroll. He'd borrow that one, for luck. Not that it would do any good, but he figured he might as well go out in proper style.

He found Slim's bedroll under the Jingle Bob wagon, and dragged it out. It was pretty heavy and lumpy, and he wondered if Slim's wife had made him take along a brick foot-warmer or something. She was always packing him with some kind of comfort-bringin do-funny, and Slim always gravely obeyed, and never got sore when the rest hoorawed him.

Pinto uncorded the tarp, began unrolling the bedroll—and then jerked as if he'd been bitten.

For long seconds he knelt there, rigid, his heart pounding while he stared down at a cowhide satchel. It was an old and scarred satchel, with much of the hair worn off and the brand of the Forked S burned deeply into the hide. And it was heavy, compactly heavy with hard contents that gave forth a muffled jingling sound to the touch.

Pinto whispered, "Gosh!" and automatically covered it with the tarp.

He found he was trembling, and felt furtive and guilty. He hadn't felt that way for a long time, not since he'd lain hidden on a brush-dotted hill and watched a cottonwood limb bend and shiver to the sudden weight of his father.

His thoughts were all tumbled, and when they took swift form again it was as if they sent voices shouting through his head. Slim had looked too long at that cashbag, and in his desperate need for money he had seen the solution. Inward-

ly driven and hounded by worry, hard hit by the knowledge that his last-ditch gamble on Pinto was as good as lost, he had buckled under to the fierce demand of a mad moment and stolen the Major's cash.

FURL drifted by with some others. He stared at Pinto's bloodless face, and his lip curled. "They been lookin' for you to ride that horse," he snarled. "Whatcha doin 'there—hidin'? Got cold feet? Git your saddle down to the corral!"

"No hurry," mumbled Pinto.

Furl started to speak again, but one of the group called to him. He snapped his mouth shut, gave Pinto a last bitter glare, and walked on.

Pinto stayed on his knees, thinking fast. Slim would never get away with this. Even if he did, forever after he'd find himself a hard man to live with. He wasn't like Ride-Away, all wit and no conscience. Slim wasn't cut out to be a good thief. This would wreck him, whichever way it turned out.

There was only one thing a friend could do for Slim. Simple enough. Just put the cashbag back in the Major's wagon and say nothing. Just say nothing, ever, except to Slim. And to Slim, mention it with a laugh, as if the thing were a joke and amounted to nothing.

Pinto took out Slim's slicker coat. With a wary eye about him, he corded up the bedroll and wrapped the cashbag with the slicker. The bedroll he tossed back under the wagon. The slicker-covered cashbag he tucked under his arm.

He'd noticed, all his life, that fortune seemed to conspire against any man engaged in dark and lawless business. And today, fortune ran true to form. When he got to the Major's big hoop-topped wagon, he found three Forked S hands sitting on the wagon tongue, jawing. They showed no immediate disposition to vacate, either. They glanced at him, at his bundle, and nodded greeting. It was evident to Pinto that the cashbag hadn't yet been missed.

One of the hands jerked his chin toward Spook-'Em's corral. They're gettin' ready down there," he remarked. "Give us a good show, kid!"

"Sure," promised Pinto, a bit too heartily, and veered off. With all the hollow spread round 'em, they had to roost right there!

He made his way back to the Jingle Bob wagon and climbed up inside. He'd just have to hide the thing somewhere in here till after the ride, and then put it back. No time to stall around now. They'd be yelling for him soon. With the bag in his hands he thought of that wicked black, and what it was going to do to him. And he thought of Slim's lost gamble. . . .

The Tombstone gambler stood alone, looking faintly bored, when Pinto found him. Pinto cut straight to the subject. "A feller—Slim Travis—he gave you four hundred dollars to bet for him on that ride," he said. "Did you lay it out yet?"

The gambler drew on his cigar and gazed at the skyline. "Not yet, sonny," he drawled. "Why?"

"I'll take that bet, mister," promptly announced Pinto.

The Tombstone gentleman eyed him. "You got that much cash?"

"Yeah." Pinto slapped his pants pockets. Borrowing wasn't anything like stealing, he figured. He was bound to lose that ride, but he'd save Slim's bet for him. Returning the Major's borrowed four hundred would be easy, providing the black didn't entirely kill him. And if by some miracle he won that ride, well, there was the prize money. He'd use it to pay back the Major. It looked pretty simple and clear-cut.

"Bueno," murmured the gambler. "The bet's your, my good sir—and a good bet, too. I don't know what fool's going to

tackle that job, but I know the horse. And —I'll take your money now, if you don't mind. My commission will be the usual five per cent. Thank you. I'll have a monte game going later on. Hope to see you around. Cigar?"

Pinto declined the cigar. He turned, and found Furl's pale eyes on him. Furl stood close by, head lowered and hairy hands balled. "You damn young twister!" he rasped, and wheeled away. There was some sort of stir up by the wagons, and the Major's penetrating voice rose above all the others.

PINTO was lugging his saddle to the corral when they stopped him. He wouldn't have believed so many cowmen could be so somberly quiet. For three days the hollow had been noisy with loud talk. Now it was almost hushed, and everybody looked like a juryman at a murder trial. Long Tom Cameron looked like the judge.

He was a cattleman of the old school, Long Tom, grizzled as a timber wolf, with ice-chip eyes and a short way of settling difficulties. He said without expression, "Drop your saddle, son. Want to talk to you. Jest answer me yes or no. Have you been bettin' against y'self on this here ride?"

Pinto swallowed. "Yes," he muttered. When Long Tom called for a straight answer he meant that and no more.

Long Tom's eyes couldn't get any colder, but the fine lines deepened at their corners. "And," he pursued relentlessly, "did you take the Major's money to lay that bet?"

"Yes. But listen—I aimed to —"

"Where'd you hide the Major's cash-bag?'

"It's—it's in your wagon," stammered Pinto.

"You put it there?" When Long Tom spoke softly like that, somebody generally had reason to shiver. "You stole it off of the Major's wagon? Didn't you?"

"Sure he did!" burst out Furl. "These fellers saw him with a bundle, an' I saw him lay that bet! The dirty young son of a horse-thief, he—"

Long Tom's wintry stare stopped him. Pinto hung his head to keep from meeting Long Tom's keen and probing eyes. He thought of Slim, and of Slim's sick young wife. "Yeah," he said huskily. "I took it!"

"That's all." Long Tom turned his back on him. "Sorry, Major. I 'pologize. The whole outfit does. You can do as you want 'bout the matter." He thrust through the crowd and stalked off, and Pinto felt as if he'd let God down and been abandoned.

"Noonan—ride and fetch the sheriff here!" snapped the Major. "Hartley—Leverill—keep watch over that thieving young cub! It's a pity Cameron was fool enough to take him on. I knew it was a mistake. Told him so at the time. Where's that gambler?"

"Right here, Major," murmured the gentleman from Tombstone. "I reckon you want your four hundred back. Here 'tis, sir, But in my opinion, this matter calls for—"

"Your opinion is valuable, no doubt," cut in the Major, who had no use for professional sharks, "but I think we can manage without it."

The gambler shrugged. He looked the crowd over. "This," he announced imperturbably, "leaves me holding four hundred dollars from a gentleman who thinks that horse can be ridden. Would anybody here like—'

"I'll copper it!" Three south valley ranchers snapped at it, and fell into an argument as to who had spoken first. With north valley's picked rider disqualified, it looked like sure money. The gambler, alert behind his poker mask, suggested odds and turned the argument into a near riot.

The crowd broke up. Nobody spoke to Pinto, not even Hartley and Leverill, the Forked S guards. They sat in the shade, while he still stood in the sun, alone, his saddle lying at his feet. The Jingle Bob hands, as they drifted silently off, looked as if they'd lost a large part of their pride.

Pinto finally sat on his saddle and stared down at the ground. He was through, blowed up, branded as a thief and a betrayer, and cast out. The Major would press charges, and prison would take in a new recruit.

IT was an hour before somebody began hollering down by Spook-'em's corral, and everybody bent steps that way. North Valley had elected another rider to carry their banner. It would be Furl, of course. He was good. Pinto had never denied that. What he found wrong with Furl was his brutal tear-'em-up method of breaking in a horse to saddle. When Furl got through with a horse it was good and broke, but it looked like beefsteak.

From where he sat on higher ground, Pinto could see everything going on down there. They hadn't built any saddling chute, and there wasn't even a snubbing post in the corral. Four men, their ropes looped and ready, went into the corral and began hazing Spook-'Em into a corner. Spook-'Em knew exactly what was in their minds. He danced out of the corner, dodged a snaking rope, and took off around the corral at a high-legged canter, snorting like he had whistles in his nose.

The four catchers fanned out and began all over again, wiping sweat and dust from their eyes. They held their ropes low, but that didn't fool Spook-'Em. He didn't go wild, the way every horse had that Pinto had ever seen being caught. He cut a corner wide, doubled back in his tracks, and skittishly shook his head as he thundered around the corral again.

Shoots of dirt boiled out through the fence, and the four men stood disorganized in the cloud of it. It looked to Pinto like the horse was having a lot more fun than its catchers. He forgot all about his own disaster in the never-fading thrill of watching an outlaw horse pit its wiles against men.

It came as something of a shock when Long Tom's deep voice growled a command behind him. "Git up!"

Pinto jumped up. For a moment Long Tom looked at him, at his freckles, his red hair, at the clean young chin and steady eyes that he had banked on meant good blood and solid stock.

He said curtly, stiff-lipped, "Yonder's the sheriff comin' for you. I left a horse an' saddle by the wagon. Use it!"

Hartley and Leverill got up, looking worried. "Now, look here, Mr. Cameron," began Hartley. "The Major told us—"

"Shet your mouth!" Long Tom sent them a frosty stare. "D'you boys want trouble with me?"

"Not by a damn sight!" admitted Hartley.

Pinto took another quick look down at the corral. They'd finally got a rope on Spook-'Em, and the horse was dragging all four men around the corral while the watching crowd whooped and hollered. Hell was going to bust loose when they tried getting a saddle on him.

"What you waitin' for?" rapped Long Tom harshly. "Git out o' here!"

"Yessir," gulped Pinto, and headed for the Jingle Bob wagon. A roar from the crowd slowed him down.

Spook 'Em was snubbed to the corral fence now, and fighting like forty devils. Gone was its contemptuous foolery. Furl had joined the four men in the corral, and was jumping about with his saddle, looking for a chance to slap it on. He had nerve; Pinto granted him that. Or maybe he wanted that prize money real bad.

"Git a move on, you young idjit!"

It was Long Tom's voice that boomed after him.

"Yessir!" Pinto bolted for the wagon. He found the saddled horse, a good bay, but he didn't mount at once, though he knew the sheriff had come into the hollow and was looking for him.

He had to know how they were making out, down there. It about a minute, Slim would either be flat broke or he'd have the money for his wife's operation. A fellow just couldn't ride off without knowing.

THEN he saw Slim top the rise and come riding at a trot down into the hollow.

Slim joined the corral crowd and listened to something the Tombstone gambler was saying to him, and about that time Furl got his saddle on the black. The saddle cocked way up behind when Furl pulled up the latigo, for Spook-'Em was arching his back like an angry cat. So they got another loop around both his front feet and threw him squealing.

Pinto shook his head. That was one way of doing it, all right, but they were liable to strain the back of that horse, Spook-'Em lay quietly in the dust now, thinking it over. Furl stepped over him, got all the saddle he could under him, and motioned to the others to take off the foot rope. They freed their ropes and jumped clear. Spook-'Em came up with Furl in the saddle,and the gallery took on an expectant hush.

Spook-'Em stood there for a second or two, giving Furl just enough time to stretch out his spurs for a fore-and-aft rake. Then he exploded.

In a firecracker series of buck-jumps he charged across the corral, and the striking of his hind feet on the stirrups mingled with the popping of the saddle. By the time he decided to swap ends, Furl had blown a stirrup and was grabbing all the leather in sight. Spook-'Em went to weaving like a fish, did an amazing pinwheel, high on his hind legs, and crashed against the fence with all the wilful premeditation of planned murder. And Furl was somewhere underneath.

It was then that Pinto instinctively obeyed the first law of the bronc-twister's code.

He vaulted onto the waiting bay and pounded for the corral. Spook-'Em scrambled up and sidled around Furl's tumbled body as if trying to decide where to kick him, while Furl feebly raised a bloodied arm to cover his face. Railroosters, their sardonic laughing wiped away, dropped from the fence and ran for the spot. Others jumped to their horses, and the corral gate was being hastily dragged open to let them in. The thing had changed from a bronc-ride to plain murder.

The riders were quick, but Pinto, with his running start, reached the gate ahead of them before it was more than half open. He swept through, scattering men, and kicked loose his stirrups as he rode at Spook-'Em. That black was a killer with a cold brain of its own, and it would take more than a slapping hat to scare him off. He let go his reins, dived out of the saddle, and as the bay rocketed on riderless, Pinto slammed into Spook-'Em and grabbed him around the arched neck.

It didn't spill the black, though it had one hind leg drawn up to piston a hoof at Furl. Pinto felt it lurch and quiver, and teeth clashed as the black tried to bite him. He caught a handful of mane, and Spook-'Em's rearing plunge did the rest, slinging him scrambling into the saddle. Somebody let out a yell.

"By Judas, he's gonna ride 'im!"

And then Slim's old familiar squall rang out. "Sta-ay with the riggin', kid!"

SPOOK-'EM accepted the challenge. He went straight up, hump-backed and twisting, and came down hard and

stiff-legged on all four feet. Pinto felt like his spine had been telescoped, but he caught the flying end of the bucking-rein, struck both spurs at the flanks, and up they went again.

At the second jolt he dragged his coiled quirt from his pocket, and cut the black a whistler that made him forget his next move.

Spook 'Em tucked his head, bellowing like a steer, and pitched straight for the fence.

He made no move to turn, and the crowd roared warning, but Pinto hung on regardless. "You dassen't, you black devil!" he grunted, laying on the quirt. "But if you're willin' to bust through, I'm right with you!"

But Spook 'Em had his own ideas. He changed course so fast his hind hoofs plowed twin furrows, and grazed the fence. Pinto flung up his leg and let the saddle-skirt take the skinning, but it almost cost him his seat. He yawed wide and barely caught his balance before the explosive fury under him went to jack-knifing all over the corral. The roar of the crowd now almost drowned out the roaring in his ears.

The saddle was popping like pistol shots, and Pinto felt pretty certain he'd never enjoy sitting down again. It was a little better when Spook-'Em broke into a run, but it wasn't a run to be trusted. Spook-'Em suddenly stopped short, skating in the dust, and did an about-face. Pinto, trying to guess his mind, figured he was going to throw a fall-back and crush him the way he'd crushed Furl. He lit in with the quirt to change the notion.

Spook 'Em pulled a crooked buck, high and wide, and Pinto lost an inch of his seat. And he knew that the horse knew. Up it went again, shaking and twisting, and each jump he made set Pinto higher in the saddle. Pinto got ready to grab for the horn. He was slipping up the dish of the cantle, and in about three more jumps he'd be over the tossing tail and hitting the ground with his head. To grab for the horn and unload fast was the only sensible thing left to do. Pinto started his hand for it.

Then, he got a swift vision of Rideaway's encouraging, dare devil grin.

Pinto dug in his spurs, let loose a winner's whoop, and whacked with the quirt.

Spook 'Em let out a bellow of mad frustration, came down on his front feet, and tried to run out from under him. He ran straight, head down, and Pinto got set for another rub at the fence.

"Gonna try that agin, huh?" said Pinto thickly, spitting blood.

But Spook 'Em had had enough. Pinto guessed it, a second too late to jump. The black had gone hog-wild and forgotten all its tricky finesse. He hit the fence, head on. . . . And so did Pinto.

WHEN Pinto came to, they were throwing water over him. Peeled poles lay strewn about, and there was a hole in the fence big enough to drive a wagon through. He mumbled, "Did I stay the minute?"

"A minute and two seconds," came the quiet voice of the Tombstone gambler.

Somebody else, counting out coin, remarked, "I swear, it's worth losin' the money to see that ride! That black passel o' hell's run plumb out o' sight!"

Slim's soft Texas drawl sounded close. "You all right, kid?"

"I dunno," said Pinto doubtfully.

He saw Long Tom Cameron loom up over him, and the Major, and the Tombstone gambler, and a lot of others. The sheriff was there, too. Long Tom said tonelessly, "You damn, young liar, the truth's come out 'bout that cashbag! You found it in Slims' bedroll."

"I didn't!" Pinto struggled up on one elbow.

"Furl's pretty bad banged up," Long

Tom went on, not heeding him. "His nerve's all shot to hell, an' he thinks he's gonna die. It's kinda give him religion. He 'lows it was him took the Major's cashbag. He hid it in Slim's bedroll, figgerin' nobody'd look for it there, an' aimed to skip out with it, first chance.

The Major nodded shortly. "I—h'm—wish to apologize," he said stiffly. "All the same, you took some of that money to bet against yourself!"

Slim motioned toward the gambler. "Me an' this gent have talked that over," he put in. "I got a notion why Pinto did that. S'pose you tell us, kid?"

Pinto tried to sit up, found no ease that way, and lay down again. "I—I didn't figger I could make the ride," he muttered. "Didn't want you to lose your money, Slim. Honest, Major, I was goin' to pay it back again."

"Ah—by the way," murmured the gambler, "I was able to drum up odds on your four hundred, Travis. You've got better than a thousand coming to you. Taking out my commission—"

But Slim didn't seem to be listening. He rose to his long-legged height, and Pinto saw that his gray eyes had that solemn, faraway look in them. "What," asked Slim, looking at nobody, "can you do with a durn kid like that?"

"I know what I'd do!" snapped the Major, whose ideas on ethics were pretty narrow. "I'd teach him a decent regard for other folk's property, if I had to larrup it into him with a strap!"

They bent over him, and Slim was grinning. And even Long Tom had creases around his tough old mouth. The Jingle Bob hands hovered around, grinning too, but solicitous of a comrade in grave discomfort.

Pinto relaxed as their hard brown hands slid gently under him and lifted him up.

He felt pretty good. . . .

Behind the eight ball? . . . Too bad, pal,
Use Thin Gillettes to win this gal!
You get good-looking shaves that please . . .
Save time and money
. . . gain new ease!
Precision made to fit your razor exactly
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢
8 for 19¢
The Thin Gillette Blade Is Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

THE GUN-PACK RUNS

Vigorous cow-country novelette

Deputy Dan Baylor, fugitive from a maddened cattle-range, knew he'd brought disgrace to the one man he'd die for, because he'd obeyed that wise old sheriff's mandate: That a lawman must use his heart as well as his guns!

TONIGHT!

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Dan and Old Honus led the concerted rush, guns spitting, as the renegades turned to meet the charge. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Lone-Wolf of the Law

THE weight of his deputy sheriff's badge hung heavily on Dan Baylor's vest as he followed his guide over the ridge and down into that tight little water meadow, deep in the Hanging Hills. His eyes were busy as they dipped

downward into the lovely, lonely spot. They were watching the I Cross cowpuncher who had ridden to the sheriff's office with a vague and thinly-veiled suggestion of crime that needed looking into. And they were busy searching the meadow floor for sign of treachery aimed at Dan's boss, Sheriff Honus Blair.

It had been a double-barreled fight all the way, carrying the arm of the law into the lawless corners of Carson County. Fighting not only the criminals themselves, but fighting the political wolves that yapped eternally at the sheriff's heels.

"I don't want this job, son," Old Honus had told Steve, "but they saddled me with it. It's one of them places where honesty, sincerity an' results are accepted by folks as their due. But if we fail just once—which we're bound to—an' the wolf pack will be snarlin' for our blood. Nothin' right or decent about it, but it's human nature, I reckon."

And he had called the turn.

There had been no help and little appreciation when old Honus had sallied out, lone-handed, to euchre three bank robbers who had struck at the Farmers and Cattleman's State Bank, in Valley City, one quiet noon. But there had been criticism and public indignation meetings when rustlers took Commissioner John Gallant's horse herd, and the sheriff's office had failed to pick up the answer to the riddle of the theft. And so it had gone, throughout old Honus' stormy four-year term of office, now expiring.

Thinking of it, Dan boiled. Never had there been a finer, more upright, courageous and sincere lawman than Honus Blair. Comparing him with Marl Haggart, his chief traducer, was like comparing gold with pyrites. One had solid worth, clear through. The other glittered brighter, attracting the eye for all its worthlessness. And people were beginning to listen overhard to Haggart, who had come into the Lobo Basin seven years before to buy the big I Cross outfit at his own price, from Ike Crosby's hard pressed widow. It made Dan sick. Furthermore, it made him mighty suspicious of this I Cross cowpuncher and his wise-smirking hint of fresh trouble for the sheriff.

"Well, here's Trout Meadow," Dan said, with a cutting edge to his voice. "What's all this mystery you've been hintin' at? I've rode about all I'm going to without you come clean an' tell me. . . ."

"Keep yore shirt on, feller," said the cowboy, a slow burning spark in his eyes. "Just around yon point, I'll show it to you."

They hit the grassy flat, broke their ponies into a gallop around the indicated ridge point. Then the cowboy was rearing his bronc, pointing.

"There's yore evidence, Mister Deputy, plain as hell an' plumb damnin'! Look it over."

Dan reined in, his eyes fixed upon a big dead steer in the grass. Nearby was a dead fire with a running iron jutting from the ashes. A torn piece of blanket lay beside the dead animal. Steve lit down, picked up that bit of fabric and looked at the brand on the animal's flank.

If he hadn't been mad to begin with, that would have touched off the fuse of his temper. The brand was Honus Blair's H B Connected—a skillful running-iron job, yet so fresh as to leave no doubt as to its having been worked over from an I Cross.

A SCOWL grew on Dan's face. The steer had been rebranded illegally, then killed. It didn't make sense. There was a bullet hole under the animal's left ear, touching its brain and tearing out a great jagged hole in its neck. Its blood was clotted on the ground and the flies swarmed noisily. Dan bent a puzzled look upon the grinning puncher.

"You dragged me plumb out here to show me a kid's joke like this?"

"Joke, eh?" The puncher sneered. "All you make out of what you see is a joke. Well, mebby I expected too much from a joke sheriff's office. But feller, you're lookin' at the reason this valley ain't had any law enforcement since Honus Blair taken office. Also it explains why all our beef gathers for the last five years has showed Blair's henyard outfit registerin' a natural increase, while everybody else has been losin' stock. Am I right, or am I?"

Dan's face darkened as he fought back an urge to pull this hired hand of Marl Haggart's from the saddle and work him over for his everlasting good. But there were certain worries that prevented that. First, the fellow had spoken the truth about the showings at beef roundups. And that fact, coupled with what he now saw, brought back the strangest of old Honus' sometimes strange preachments:

"Obey the letter of the law, son," the sheriff had told him once, "an' don't get to thinkin' yo're Godamighty just because you wear a star. A sheriff must use his heart as well as his head, his saddle-seat an' his gun. There's bad in every good man an' good in every badman. Sometimes it's hard to choose. When you can't make up yore mind, think of the lawbreaker as one of yore close kin. Then let yore conscience be yore guide."

That was what old Honus had said, and it came back to Dan now with added significance. A new and harder light seemed suddenly shed upon the old man's character, and eagerly Dan tried to read it. Miserably, his thoughts drifted back to the time when, as a button of twelve, he had come to Honus' little spread, looking for food and work.

The cowman had looked him over with a twinkle in his gray eyes, allowing that the labor of running the H B Connected was getting too much for one man, that it was time he took himself on a tophand.

And so Dan had gone to work for Honus Blair. Later, the old man had sent him to Roswell to school. He had come back, far in debt to Honus, to find the old man a sheriff and a job as deputy awaiting him. The H B Connected was running itself, Honus only employing men as reps with the different wagon outfits, come beef gather. Now it looked like, unknown to him, Old Honus had been. . . .

"Well, what you gonna do?" The I Cross cowboy's voice struck into his preoccupation.

"Do?" Dan turned narrowed eyes upon the man. "Exactly nothin', feller. This job is so raw it stinks. Ever since Blair pinned on the badge, your boss an' every man ridin' for him has done his damnedest to turn the people against him. This is another of his cute tricks, but it's too thin. I—"

"Good!' sneered the puncher. "So you're takin' yore stand beside that four flushin' ol' hypocrite, Honus Blair. When the boys run down the wide looper that done this job, we'll make him spill his guts an' include you in the skullduggary. An' my orders from Marl Haggart is to fetch you along the trail an' have you there at the windup. So—" his gun flashed out "—up with yore hands!"

Dan was almost at his stirrup and his move was a little quicker than that of his guide. He leaped, caught the gun and yanked, leaping aside. The weapon blared, powder stinging his wrist. But the cowpuncher was coming out of his saddle, spitting curses. Steve wrenched the gun from his grasp, sent it arcing away into the deep grass. The fellow was grappling with him when Dan hit him flush on the jaw. It knocked him down and he remained there, shaking his head to clear it.

"You taken in just a little too much territory, neighbor," drawled Steve. "If your outfit holds to the trail of the rustler that done this, then I will be in at the finish, with bells on. You too. Get on your pony."

The man obeyed, rubbing his jaw, and Steve cast about him for sign. The first thing he noticed was blood sprayed on the grass, and trampled grass leading to where a horse had stood. Tracks led away, and Dan mounted at once to follow them.

"Looks funny to me," he told the sullen puncher, "that a rustler would work on a beef an' then kill it."

"We killed it, shootin' at him," muttered the man. "An' we tallied your wide-looper too."

"We'll see what we'll see," said Dan. "Come on."

FOLLOWING the tracks, they loped rapidly northward along the axis of the meadow. And the devils of torment rode with the deputy. Watching for those occasional tell-tale red signs left by the rustlers, he could not repress his fear that they might be from the veins of old Honus himself. It was crazy. . . . Yet the feeling grew.

Two days before, the sheriff had left the office, grinning slyly. "Look for me when you see me, son," he had said. "I've got a hen on."

Thinking back now, Dan could see a lot of things, carelessly passed over at the time, that looked bad now. The silent, gun-hung men who stopped every now and then at the sheriff's little H B Connected, to prepare food and swap jaded ponies for fresh ones. And, more particularly, Honus' strange philosophies regarding the law. To Dan there was only right and wrong, with no ground in between, save for outlaws. Now he found himself desperately trying to compromise. He urged his pony to greater speed, yet he was deathly afraid of what he would find at the end of the bloody trail.

Over the ridge the trail led, then down a winding draw where the blood spots showed starkly on the white granite rocks. Opposite the headquarters ranch of Haggart's own outfit they were observed by horsemen who came at a swift run.

Haggart, blocky, florid and with arrogance in his manner, was leading them and his broad face was a study in pride when he pulled down before them.

He glanced at Dan's guide as if to read what lay back of his sullen look. Then he turned a hard, frowning gaze upon Dan himself.

"You, eh?" he hummed. "Why didn't Honus come to see his skunks skun?"

"Blair wasn't in Valley City," put in the rider. "Hadn't been for two days. Baylor claims he don't know where he is, so I fetched him."

"Natural, he wouldn't know," sneered Haggart. And to Dan: "See the evidence, did you?"

Steve smiled thinly as he handed the guide his gun, noted Haggart's look of astonishment and said: "I saw it, yes. And it wasn't worth the ride. Of all the cold-deck plants I ever saw, that one takes the cake. What did you do, Haggart, shoot one of your own men, or beef a calf an' carry it along to squirt blood sign for you?"

Haggart glowered. "I take that right unkindly, Baylor. My men caught one of Blair's riders changing a brand on my beef. They—"

"Blair has no men, and damn well you know it, Haggart."

"That's what you say, feller. Who else would run a H B Connected over an I Cross?"

"That's what I aim to find out. This waddy says your riders are on the trail. Find the rustler yet?"

The cowman frowned. "Lost the sign up in Alder Canyon, an' they're swingin' circles lookin' for him. We'll get him, Baylor, an' when we do, you an' Honus Blair better be hard to catch."

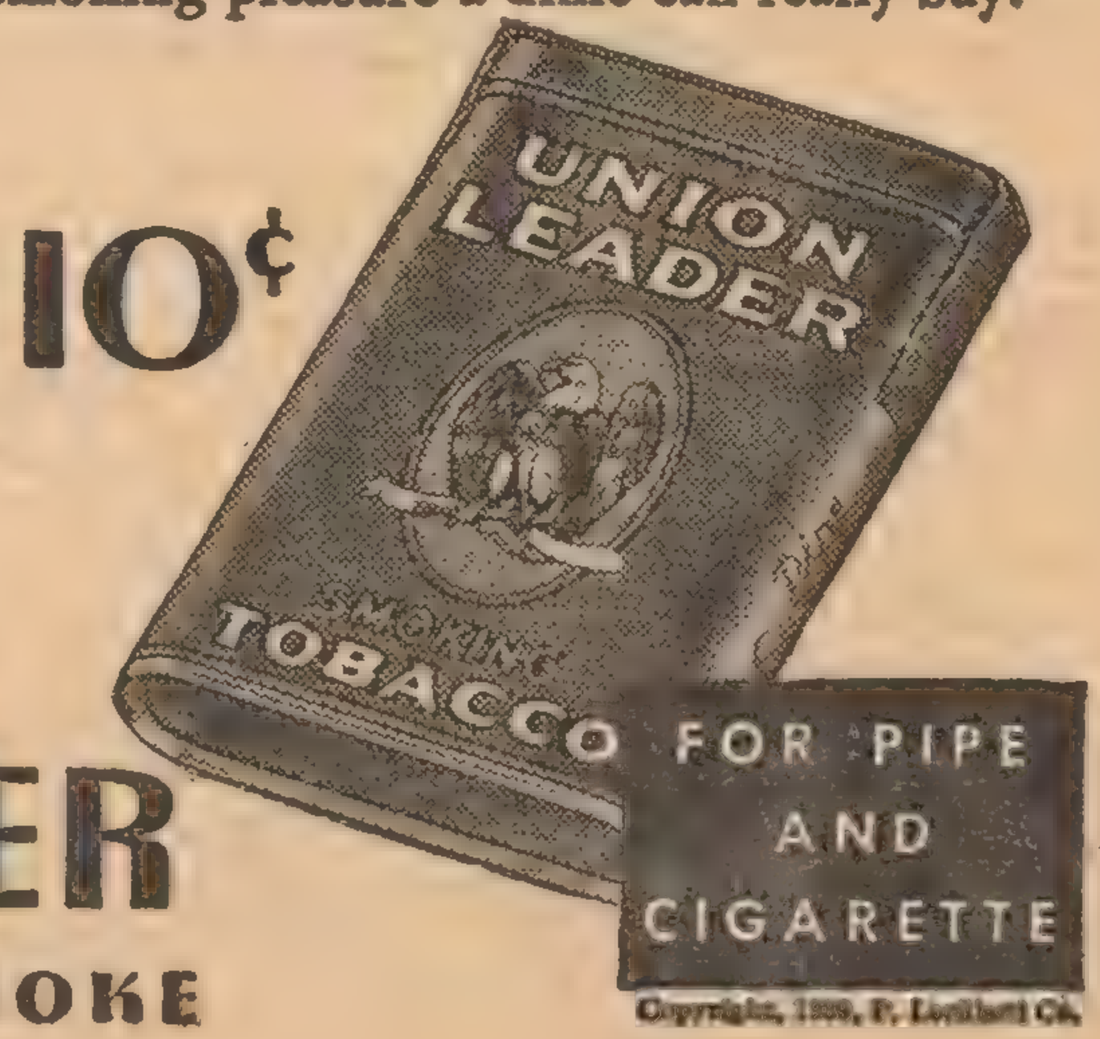
Dan laughed tauntingly. "I'll be plenty willing to run if you get away with a plant like this. Let's go!"

The "Leader" both Dad and Son Cheer

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON! You see it everywhere—a young fellow rolling cigarettes from the same big red tin of Union Leader that his Dad fills a pipe from!

Dad's choice of Union Leader is based on 30 years of smoking, looking for just what Union Leader gives a man! The deep full flavor of hilltop Kentucky Burley! The heart-warming mellowness that earns a smoker's life-long friendship!

Son chooses Union Leader because long-aging makes it extra mild and free from bitterness and bite. And the way it's cut means perfect cigarettes. Try Union Leader yourself and see how much downright smoking pleasure a dime can really buy!



UNION LEADER

THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKE

Copyright, 1939, P. Lorillard Co.

THEY rode in a body, and where two wooded ridges spread their arms to enfold Alder Canyon, they turned into the hills, Haggart in the lead, Dan following and the rest straggling along the narrow trail. Here again, Dan picked up the blood sign—the spots farther apart now but plainly discernible to one schooled in following a trail. And thus, when they were passing a narrow, slotlike mouth of a tributary from which poured a brawling little brook, a hoof mark and a blood splatter were all Dan needed to know that the hunted man had turned up here.

Haggart had missed it. So had his men. And Dan kept his mouth shut, puzzling as to why the blood spots continued on up the main draw. Could there be two of the rustlers, both wounded? It seemed improbable, the only alternative being that the fugitive had backtracked, leaving his pursuers a blind trail dead ahead. And so it proved.

Up the canyon a piece, they came upon a half dozen drowsing ponies. Down by the creek, an equal number of I Cross cowboys lolled in the shade, smoking. They jumped up at the approach of their boss. Haggart leered at them.

"Fine way of runnin' down a rustler," he complained, "lollygaggin' over papers an' tobacco. Expect him to come back an' join yuh?"

"We've lost it, plumb," shamefacedly confessed one of them. "Even hunted the rimrocks an' the mesa above. Blood just ended all of a sudden, like the feller had took wings."

They all dismounted and sat in the shade, while Haggart listened to what had already been done. And it struck Dan that the whole thing had been rehearsed. At least, it seemed like there was no great desire on the part of anyone to find the wounded man.

A half hour of this and Haggart allowed that the men had blotted the sign with their own tracks, that nothing was to be gained by hanging around in the canyon.

"But old Honus has got a lot of explaining to do when he shows up, Baylor. You tell him that, and that I want to see him."

"I'll tell him," said Dan.

"What you gonna do?" Sudden suspicion hit the cowman, when Dan was the only one not to rise.

"I'll take a pasear up the gulch an' see can I pick up them blood spots again."

They laughed at him, mounted and lit out for the I Cross. And Dan waited for the last echo of their going to die before starting downstream toward the narrow mouth of the gorge that had swallowed the wounded rustler.

CHAPTER TWO

Hunted Deputy

THERE were times, as he followed the devious windings of that cliff-bordered defile, that Dan came to doubt that faint bit of evidence that had turned him into it. From the entrance up, he saw nothing further to bear out the deduction. It was slow, hard going, with rocks, fallen from above, barring the way. The gorge wound like a serpent, deep into the heart of the Hanging Hills.

The sun dropped behind the ridge, plunging the gorge into gloom. Certain now that he had guessed wrong, Dan hung on only because of a dogged persistence. Dusk was settling when he found the timbered hillside stretching away invitingly to his right. And—more stirring to his jaded senses—hoof tracks.

It drew him, imbued him with fresh hope. And, just as darkness fell, it led him into a grassy *cienega*. Vainly, he looked for lights, then decided to spend the night right where he was, taking up the chase at first daylight. He was ravenous, but there was no food. There was only a damp saddleblanket against the highland chill that was already seeping

into his bones. But there was water and grass for his pony, and it could have been far worse.

He drew the rig, tethered his pony and was gathering wood for a fire when a high-pitched voice, tremulous with desperation, stabbed his nerves.

"Up, mister! Get those hands up! I've got you against the stars and I'll let you have it if you make a gun-move!"

Dan straightened, his arms filled with fire wood. There was no chance to get at his gun, and anyway he didn't make war on women or young boys. He dropped the wood and raised his hands.

"What's the big idea?" he spoke into the darkness.

There was a rush from the thickets, and starlight ran along the barrel of a leveled pistol. A slender body brushed him, fumbling frantically for his gun. It came jerking from its leather.

"Who—who are you?" It was a woman, all right. And Dan sensed a tension in the query that moved him.

"I'm Dan Baylor, ma'am—deputy sheriff. What's the idea of the stick-up?"

"Thank God!" It was only a whisper, followed by a sob. Then: "I couldn't take a chance on your being one of the I Cross men, and I had to have help. . . ."

"Help?"

"It's my brother," she gasped. "He—he's bad hurt. I thought I could take care of him, but, but he's out of his head and so terribly hot. I'm afraid he—he'll die if. . . . Oh, please come!"

As if certain of his reaction, she turned from him, leading him through the brush, over a low rise and down into a small *vega,* like a cup in the hillside. A single light split the gloom and a small log cabin loomed in the shadows of box elder trees. She waited silently while he tied his pony to the rack, then opened the door to let him in.

As he crossed the threshold, Dan heard a low moan, then high-pitched jabbering —the words running together. Her fingers were on his arm, restraining him and he saw how pale she was, how distraught. Her lips were trembling as she handed him his gun.

"I . . . I'm sorry I had to take it," she told him. "But I couldn't take a chance on anyone killing him. You understand?"

"I think so, ma'am."

"This—" Gingerly she touched the badge on his shirt front. "Will you please take it off. If he sees it, he may not understand, and it may make him worse. But he's got to have help."

Dan didn't question it. He removed his star, pocketed it, then patted her arm comfortingly. "I'll do what I can, miss," he promised. "An' if he's too bad, I'll get him to a medico."

Her eyes, fixed on his appealingly, suddenly filled with tears. And he was struck by her wild beauty. Patched levis and faded woolen shirt failed to hide the lithe curves of her slender body. And, even though she was pale, her eyes red from weeping and her mouth drawn from worry, nothing could hide her wilderness grace.

Turning abruptly, she led him into a cubby room where a writhing figure lay upon a rude bed. Dan stepped close, looked down, and felt shock pour through him. For it was little more than a boy who lay there, delirious, burning with fever, his bare torso wrapped with a crazy sheeting of bloody bandage. His hands and his feet were bound with rope, then tied to the bed.

The girl was whispering, "I had to tie him up. He kept wanting to get up and ride. He—he thinks he—" her voice failed for a moment— "has to kill a man."

Dan could only nod as he rallied from surprise. The wounded man's tousled hair was white as tow. And, contorted with pain and the hallucinations of fever though it was, he knew that face from having seen it many times on dodgers.

This was the Cottontop Kid, three times wanted for murder!

ONCE before, Dan had looked upon the cocky little killer. That was when his boss, old Honus, had trapped him and fetched him into the Valley City jail. The sheriff had spent an hour closeted with the Kid, but afterward he never spoke of what passed between them. That night, the little outlaw had opened his cell, taken his gun from the sheriff's desk and departed. That too needed explanation, but Honus had never put out a thing and Dan hadn't pressed the matter.

Dan knelt beside the low bed.

"Get hot water," he commanded. "An' fetch clean rags."

He cleaned and scalded his Barlow knife, thankful that the Kid was unconscious as he probed in quivering muscles for the two slugs. The boy was bled white and in bad shape. But, barring infection, Dan saw it was a matter of shock and weakness more than anything else.

When he had finished his rude surgery, he bound the wounds and covered the restless patient with a ragged blanket.

"You're worn out, ma'am,' he told her. "I'll set up with him while you get some sleep. He should be better in the morning, but if he ain't, we'll get a doctor for him. How'd he get these wounds?"

She bit her lip. "I—I don't know. From his ravings, it seems he was shot by the I Cross men, who chased him hard. There's something about cattle rustling and stage robbing, but mostly about a man he's got to kill. It's all mixed up, but I—I don't think he's really a bad boy. He's been all that a brother should be—to me."

"I don't think he's too bad, ma'am," Dan comforted her. "Though we're all a little bad, I reckon. He's Billy Foster, ain't he?"

She started, flushed. "Yes, Billy Foster. I'm Anne Foster, his sister."

They shook hands very soberly then, with a smile, the girl left the room to get some sleep. And Dan drew up a homemade chair to sit beside his patient.

The Kid was quietly sleeping. And Dan felt a sense of pity as he watched him. Wanted for murder, hounded from pillar to post by the law. Not daring to show his face to an honest man lest that man betray him to the gallows. Dan wondered if Old Honus had felt the same pity for this harried youngster as he was feeling now.

Sometimes the Kid slept; sometimes he raved and cried out. Sometime in the early morning hours, Anne got up, built a fire and made coffee for Dan. It was terribly weak coffee, and Dan thought he knew why. The signs of abject poverty are not hard to read.

Sleep had done her good. There was a bit of color in her cheeks now, and her freshly combed hair fell in brown waves about her straight shoulders. She had a smile for him, but her eyes clouded when she glanced at the sleeping Kid.

"He's better," said Dan. "His fever's dropped an' he's breathin' easier. How about food? He needs broth."

She blinked. "I haven't had meat in the house since he fetched in a deer, over a month ago. I've a little flour, some beans, and. . . ."

"I'll try to shoot you a beef, come daylight," he promised, then cut off abruptly as the Kid began to babble.

"Three dead . . . damn 'em. Three et by coyotes an' one left for 'em to fight over. Gotta down him before I can rest. Gotta kill him. . . ."

"Who is it he's got to kill?" asked Dan.

The girl's face hardened. "I—I don't know," she said, coldly, and he knew she had lied.

Dan watched her go to the side of her stricken brother and stroke his brow. His raving subsided to soft mutterings. Dan dropped into another seat, let his chin fall upon his chest. He was suddenly unutter-

ably weary. Outside, a wolf was howling, the weird sound getting fainter as his senses flickered. He remembered wondering if it really meant that a man was about to die when a wolf howled. And if so, who it was. . . .

THE newly risen sun was striking in the east window when Anne woke him. Breakfast was on the table—plain wheat cakes and that same weak coffee. But he was hungry and grateful for it. The meal over, he looked at the Kid again. By daylight, there was a difference. He looked ever so much more youthful and his hair was plainly prematurely gray, instead of white. His face was deeply lined, as if he had lived two full lifetimes in his twenty years. But he was normally cool now and his even breathing seemed to indicate sleep instead of coma. The girl came over to stand beside him.

"Will he need a doctor, do you think?"

"He'll need rest an' food—strong beef soup," he told her. "I'll go out an' get some beef, then I'll have another look at him."

She gave him a grateful, teary little smile and Dan went outside, embarrassed. He saddled and rode. About a half mile up the meadow, he shot a yearling wearing the brand that Old Ike Cross had made famous in the Lobo country, the brand that Marl Haggart was making notorious. And it forced a chuckle from him as he contemplated what he would say to Haggart's riders in case they should ride up now. He, a deputy sheriff, right bower of Honus Blair—already accused of rustling.

He dressed the animal out, dragged the hide and entrails to a little eroded gully and got the meat back to the Foster cabin. There he hung what he thought Anne could use and helped her jerk the rest, hanging it on lines stretched across the trees at the back of the house. After that he went in to look at the Kid.

"The boy's doin' as well as can be expected," he told the girl. "Reckon I'll have to be movin' on. If he takes a turn for the worse, climb a pony an' come down to the sheriff's office. I'll see that a doctor comes up here to look at him."

She followed him outside, standing beside him as he prepared to mount. He had the feeling that there was something she wanted to tell him, and as he waited, he was suddenly amazed when she sobbed, threw her arms about his neck and kissed him. Then she had loosed him and was running for the cabin door like a scared deer.

Dan rode away from the place profoundly moved and excited.

On the ride to Valley City, Dan saw no one. Nor, as the miles fell behind, was he at peace with himself. A fine deputy he had turned out to be! Anne Foster had confessed to him that there were men who disliked her brother, who had tried and would try again to destroy him. And she had asked as a special favor that Dan keep their whereabouts a secret, until Billy Foster was well enough to protect himself. For herself, she asked nothing. So Dan had promised, moved by her fervency.

She had also implied that the Kid was friendly with Honus Blair, maybe even working for him. And now that rankled inside Dan. It made him feel like he was party to whatever lawless skullduggery Old Honus was up to.

That feeling had drawn down the corners of his mouth and planted smoky glints in his eyes by the time he reached town and walked into the sheriff's office.

HONUS was there, his feet cocked indolently on the desk, his face buried in a periodical devoted to the activities of peace officers. He came to his feet at Dan's entry.

"Where in the hell have you bin?" he demanded, with mock severity. "A purty pass when a man can't leave his office

without his deputy gallivantin' off somewheres. You look like you've bin through the mill."

Dan braced his knuckles on the desk, staring into Honus' pale eyes. "That'll keep," he said, tartly. "Honus, I want some plain talk with you."

Honus Blair sobered. "You serious? By the gods, you are. What's eatin' on yuh, Dan?"

"Where'd you go the other day, Honus? What you bin up to? An' no beatin' around the bush, mind!"

Brief anger touched the sheriff's face, then vanished. "I ain't really beholdin' to tell you, son, but I'm goin' to. Me an' a deputy U. S. marshal from El Paso has been stakin' out on a little road agent job that somehow leaked. Paid us off, too. Him an' me caught three jiggers stoppin' the Rawson-Valley City stage. They elected to fight an' drawed the losin' end. Two dead stage robbers an' one with a hole in him; that was our tally. Satisfied?"

A little bewildered, Dan was suddenly ashamed of his suspicions. Yet the explanation didn't cover Anne's hint that the Cottontop Kid was working with or for Honus Blair—the Kid, who had been shot while running an H B Connected on an I Cross beef.

Haltingly, Dan told how the I Cross cowpuncher had come to Valley City to take him to the dead beef with the altered brand, of following the bloody trail of the rustler and of losing it in Alder Canyon. But purposely he left out the aftermath, wherein he had awaited the departure of the baffled I Cross men, and had ridden to the hide-away of the Cottontop Kid.

ANGER touched the sheriff at the inference of his connection with petty lawlessness. Then he was laughing.

"I'm damned if that ain't good! Hopin' to put the skids under me by framin' me as a rustler. Anytime Marl Haggart an' his men lose a blood trail in Alder Canyon, there ain't no trail. Like as not they done that job themselves an' planted the blood to clinch their augerment. Believe me, son, you've give me the ammunition I need to show up Haggart an' his crowd that want me outa here. I'm goin' all the way through with this."

Dan had a sudden pang of fear. He knew Old Honus too well not to recognize the flag he was flying now. The old lawman was aroused and not given to boasting. In running this down to its bitter ending, he might blunder onto the answer—in the Foster house, and reveal how utterly Dan had fallen down on his job.

Bitterly the deputy regretted now that he hadn't brought the stricken little outlaw down, making a clean breast of everything. But even as he rose to move to the window, he saw, in memory, Anne's pleading eyes fixed on his own. And in his ears was her fervent plea for his promise not to reveal their whereabouts—a promise he had given.

The visions faded and Dan saw the crowd moving purposefully toward the jail. Marl Haggart was in the lead, Commissioner John Gallant, who ran the Lazy G spread at the upper end of the basin, struggling to keep up. Behind them came a score of townsmen and cowpunchers, grim and determined.

Dan whirled upon the chuckling sheriff. "Looks like you'll have yore chance to start goin' clear through—now!"

Honus stared at him, then he heard the tramp of boots and the mutter of deep voices. He blinked, stroked his longhorn mustache and shrugged. Then they were crowding into the office with a forbidding silence. They were all looking at the sheriff, but he looked only at Marl Haggart, patently the leader. His voice held a challenge.

"Spill yore riddle, Haggart. An' get ready to swaller a bitter bait."

Haggart grinned mirthlessly, tossed his

hand at the rotund commissioner. "You tell him, John."

The cowman-politician shook his shoulders. "Honus," he said, with the air of one who tackles an unpleasant job, "we're here to iron out something queer, mighty queer. One of Marl's riders took Baylor out to look at an H B Connected beef—the brand made over from an I Cross. Marl's men had caught the rustler in the act, plugged him an' chased him into the hills, where they lost the trail. They put Baylor on the trail until it was plain he wouldn't do nothin'. Then Marl pulled his boys over the hill to watch. Without hesitatin', Baylor taken off up a boxed canyon, where he stayed all night. That was last night. This morning, they saw Baylor come back, an' backtrailed him. You tell it from there, Marl."

"Up that canyon," went on Haggart, "we find an empty cabin, a bloody basin of water, bloody rags an' two flattened slugs on the table. Blair, yore crooked deputy spent the night with the wide-looper who ran yore brand over mine, fixed his wounds an' helped him get away. Fer augerment, le's say he's doin' all that without yore knowledge. . . . What you gonna do about it, Honus?"

The sheriff shifted his glance to Dan. "What about it, son? Who was that rustler? Whatever you say is gospel as far as I'm concerned. Speak up."

Dan shook his head. As for himself, he wasn't afraid. He'd made a promise and he would pay the price of his mistake. But to confess the truth now would condemn Old Honus, ruin him, remove him from office in disgrace.

"What happened up there," he said huskily, "is my business."

"There you are, Honus," gloated Haggart. "It's as good as a confession. Put this Judas deputy of yores behind bars, or we'll get this office filled with a man that will. I'll file the complaint, holdin' proof up my sleeve that'll send him up to the penitentiary. An' don't get the idea you can let him walk outa here, like you did the Cottontop Kid."

And when Old Honus hesitated, his face showing his inner turmoil, Marl Haggart cried: "Grab Baylor, boys. We've fooled around with this crooked sheriff about long enough."

There was one chance, and Dan took it. He swerved away from an outstretched hand, slammed his fist to Marl Haggart's mouth. It drove the cowman back against Commissioner Gallant, upending them both in a corner. Out came Dan's gun. He drove the muzzle into the face of a rushing puncher, dropping him. He clipped another alongside the head, driving him against the wall. He popped outside, slamming the door in the faces of the aroused I Cross men. When they emerged, with guns spitting, Dan was aboard his pony, hugging the withers and rolling his spurs, fifty or more yards away.

CHAPTER THREE

Two Outlaws Meet

DAN didn't fear pursuit. He owned one of the finest ponies on Lobo range, and no one knew the hills better than he. The highlands swallowed him and night blanketed his trail. Under cover of darkness, he visited the hideaway of the Cottontop Kid.

As Haggart had said, it was deserted. The Kid might have staged a miraculous recovery and, having learned what had transpired, insisted upon changing his base. But even as Dan built upon that premise, he rejected it. Fear tortured him, and all of it was for the girl—Anne. The Kid was tough and had earned whatever fate overtook him. But what about the girl who was his sister?"

The jerked meat, dry now, still hung on the lines where he and Anne had hung it. That and what little food remained in

the cabin, served to assuage his hunger. Some of the rest went into his saddle bags. The following day, lying on his belly on a high pinnacle, he saw the coursing posses sweeping the canyons for him, hunting his sign. But no one came near him, and his mind turned to the Fosters. The cabin had shown signs of a brief struggle, nothing more.

Each hour the trail was getting colder, yet he dared not yet look for them. And where, in all this maze of tumbled hills, could he look for them?

Dan remained where he was all that day, the succeeding night and part of the next day. By that time, all evidence of questing horsemen had vanished. With the afternoon waning, he saddled, mounted and set out for the lower country, every faculty alive to danger.

Night found him haunting the vicinity of the I Cross. But if the Fosters were here, he got no inkling of it. Cowboys laughed, joshed and played cards in the bunk-house. The big ranch house was silent, the single light attesting the presence of its owner. Bitterly disappointed, he quit the scene sometime after midnight, snatching a little sleep in a mot of scrub pines on the front range of the hills.

From his covert, Dan saw the I Cross outfit rope out horses and resume the search, as if they had been whipped to the chase by Marl Haggart. And, in the succeeding days he came to know that they meant business. His scant food supply ran out and he knew hunger. In a try for more of the dried meat, he found a guard at the Foster cabin and barely escaped being caught—or shot.

It was Saturday morning, nearly two weeks since his flight, that Dan, gaunt and desperate, again watched the I Cross men rope out their ponies at sunrise. He saw them move away from the corrals in a body, a dust bomb moving behind them. Then, when they had covered about a mile, he saw one of the riders break from the cavalcade, angling toward the hills. White puffs of gunsmoke broke from the others.

It was the Cottontop Kid! Dan needed no glasses to determine that. The flying white hair, the straight-up riding in the stirrups to save jarring his freshly healed wounds, the desperation of his flight, all those pegged him. Strange excitement gripped Dan. He too was desperate now, and the Kid was key to his salvation.

Riding the ridges, Dan watched the Kid shake off a rather half hearted pursuit, then lit out at full speed for a pass where, he guessed, the little outlaw would sooner or later ride. He was off his pony and had barely taken up a commanding position in the notch when Cottontop came galloping along the trail. His gun was lifting as he showed himself.

"Reach, Kid, an' step out of the saddle!"

He looked into a pair of pale, wildling eyes. Then the Kid had reared his horse and quit its back in a headlong dive that carried him into a thicket beside the trail. Dan might have killed him as he soared through the air. But, even as he squinted across the barrel of his piece, he recalled that serious, pleading glance of the girl, Anne. He lowered his weapon and leaped for cover.

The outlaw's shot barely missed him.

CAUTIOUSLY, Dan followed the noise of the Kid's passage through the brush. Until silence had come again and the outlaw was forted up in a nest of rocks, against the scarp. Dan took up a position from which he could command all approaches to the covert.

"Come out, Kid!" he shouted. "Give up peaceable an' I'll try to get you all the breaks the law allows."

Silence for a moment, then: "Who's talkin'?"

"Dan Baylor, deputy sheriff of Lobo County!"

Taunting laughter. "Dan Baylor! Nice

thing cavin' to a gent like you. Hell, you're wanted worse'n I am. Haggart's posted a five-hundred dollar bounty on yore head. How does it feel, law-dog, to be skulkin' on the dodge?"

Dan called: "That's my worry, Kid, an' none of yours. Come on out."

Silence answered him. Minutes ticked away, running into an hour. The sun beat down like hammer strokes, drying Dan out, making him miserable. But if it was bad for him, he knew it was worse where the Kid was holed.

Patiently, he waited. And after while the Kid's voice came. "Listen, Tinbadge! Honus Blair didn't have nothin' to do with brandin' that steer. Neither did I."

"Go on," hollered Dan. "I'm listenin'."

"It was Haggart's idea. He was layin' the plant when I come up, bracin' him for a job. He offered me the chance of goin' with two other gents, to rob the Rawson-Valley City stage. When I refused, he tried for the bounty on my scalp. We had gunplay. I killed one of his men an' they sifted lead under my hide. He's bad, Baylor, all bad."

"You knew that when you tried to sign on with him. You're tarred with the same stick, Cottontop."

"Like hell! I wanted to get in with him to kill him."

"It makes a good story, Kid."

"It's gospel. He an' three other gents killed my mother an' father an' taken my oldest sister. She killed herself. I've killed the other three an' only he's left. He's a hard nut to crack, ridin' ringed with guns like he does. But I'll live to kill him, an' nothin' else matters. I've got to do it fast though, 'cause—'cause he's got Anne!"

Dan was shocked. "Anne? You mean she's—?"

"She's at his ranch. Can't you get her outa there, Baylor. Ain't that badge of yores worth nothin' against that coyote. Hey—what you doin' with a fire?"

SMOKE was filling the canyon, stinging Dan's nostrils. And not until then had he realized that it was on the wind, swirled in from the valley.

The Cottontop Kid's yell stung him.

"Hey, Baylor, the hills are afire below us. It's burnin' down around the I Cross somewheres. An' Anne's there. For God's sake, man, ride down an' take her outa there. If you'd let me, I'd help you."

"I couldn't trust you, Kid."

Silence for a moment, then: "You—you like my sister, Baylor?"

"That's got nothin' to do with you an' me, Kid."

"Answer me! You like that girl?"

"Damn you, yes," cried Dan, furiously. "She's the first woman I ever saw that I wanted. But. . . ."

"She feels the same about you, feller. An' you can have her, just for the killin' of the two gunies that are holdin' her—Slim Avery an' the Fox. If that fire gets close, they'll ride out alone to save their own skins. An' she . . . she's chained to the wall."

"The dirty low-withered, cow-hocked son of a coyote-buzzard cross!" Dan broke into hysterical cursing, brazenly showing himself. "You an' me gotta call this off, Kid. You ride down for yore sister an' I'll go after Haggart."

"No!" The outlaw was standing up now, glaring down at him. "He's mine; you hear me. You go after Anne. When I kill Haggart, I'll come in an surrender. But hurry!"

The smoke was thicker now and they were running, each for his pony. Dan, intent now only upon what lay ahead, lost sight of the Kid. Then he was roaring down the pass, tormented by ugly pictures of a house wrapped in flame and a girl straining at her chains, crying for help. . . .

Fire cut him off from the canyon mouth and he detoured, cursing the extra miles. From a ridgeback, he saw the hill-locked valley, through veils of shifting smoke.

The grass, stirrup deep, was feeding sheets of flame, leaping skyward and crawling like a bloody-fanged monster toward the hidden buildings of the I Cross. Crying out, Dan rolled the spurs and put his panicky pony down into that welter.

Blackened, singed, wet with sweat, he swept ahead of a flame tongue reaching up the valley, thundering into the yard of the I Cross. Even as he neared, he saw the corral gate swing wide and a herd of terrified ponies stampede to freedom. Then he was knifing down upon the two mounted gun hands, Slim Avery and the Fox.

Whether they recognized him or whether they were taking no chances of having their escape frustrated, Dan never knew. But they shot their hands to their guns the instant they spotted him. And the rattle of gunfire sound dimned in the hissing crescendo of the oncoming prairie fire.

CHAPTER FOUR

Into the Smoke

OBSESSED with the one idea of reaching the house and releasing the girl before the arrival of the fire, Dan went low over the withers, jerked his gun and spurred. A bullet whined past him and then he had tall Slim Avery in his sights and dropped the hammer. The gangling cowpuncher seemed lifted from the saddle as he cried out weakly and went over the rump of his horse. Steve was shifting his weapon to cover the cadaverous little Fox when lead sheered through his horse. His mount shuddered, screamed shrilly and dropped.

Dan shook his feet from the stirrups and landed free of the threshing beast. And he and the Fox fired almost as one. Dan's shot killed the pinch-faced gunman. The Fox's slug clipped Dan alongside the head, knocking him down.

Dan was up almost at once, but he was groggy. All strength seemed to have deserted him and he reeled drunkenly as he made for the house, the fire hissing behind him. Already the flames were splitting on the grassless ground of the yard, but the barn, with its crammed haymow, was crackling and hissing. And the heat against the house logs was terrific as he shouldered through the door and stood gasping the comparatively clear air inside.

From somewhere in the house, he heard the clank of chains and the low, despairing crying of a girl. It moved Dan to instant action.

"Anne!" he cried, and hurled himself across the room and through a door. "Anne, girl, where are you?"

"Dan!"

She sat on the floor, feet braced against the wall, tugging at the chain fixed with a cuff to one ankle and to a ring in the log side. She was pale; her eyes were wide with fright.

"Dan!" she cried again, and her finger was pointing. "Quick, the key! Hanging yonder by the door."

Coughing from the smoke, his head pounding from the bullet cut, he found the key and released her. Clinging to one another, they quit the house, staggering out into a murk so dense as to defy their vision. The heat seared them and, as they stood confused, it seemed that the fire had raced clear around the compound, trapping them.

It was then that Slim Avery's terrified, riderless horse came plunging out of the murk. And desperation drove Dan at its looped reins. He caught the animal, quieted it, got Anne into the saddle and flung up behind her. Then he was kicking the horse in the flank, scourging it into a mad run down wind.

Details of that ride were always hazy to Dan. They hurtled through smoke so thick it gagged them, swerving this way and that to escape licking tongues of flame as dazed antelopes, coyotes and deer

angled across their path. Stampeding cattle, bawling their terror, threatening to unhorse them.

Then the flames were behind them, and their mount was plunging into a stream, dipping his head to suck up the cool flow. Dan slid off, wetting his neck scarf and handing it to Anne. But her eyes were not for him. She stared out through the pall, crying out softly: "Dan—look!"

HORSEMEN, only blurred shadows, showed on the far bank. Then Dan had recognized Marl Haggart and his riders, grimed with smoke, their horses lathered from hard, hot running.

"Look, Boss!" a voice roared. "It's Baylor an' that Foster filly. He's got her loose!"

For a moment, Dan remained frozen. They too held inactive for a split second, then they were spurring their mounts into the flow, drawing their guns. Desperately, Dan slapped Anne's pony.

"Ride, Anne!" he yelled. "Run for it!"

The pony leaped and Anne's scream of protest was drowned out in the smash of pistol fire. Something plucked at Dan's sleeve. He felt a sharp agony like a hornet's sting on his thigh. Little geysers of water rose from the river's breast and, to escape the leaden sleet, Dan went under the surface in a long dive.

It was shallow, but it was protection. And Dan swam strongly under water, straight down the axis of the sluggish current. The vibration of hoofs was in his ears, then the violent threshing of the water as lunging horses closed in on him. Hoofs struck him, beat him down. His senses faded as they rode over him. A few seconds must have passed, then his fingers were touching the bank.

He rose reeling, and staggered out.

"Anne!" he cried, dazedly, "where are you, Anne?"

The crackle of greedy flames answered him, and scudding clouds of smoke set him to coughing. Of Haggart, his riders and Anne, there was no sign or sound. And he knew a vast and bitter pessimism. They had taken the girl again. And he, Dan, was afoot, with the flames rushing down upon him.

Cursing savagely, Dan broke into a blind run, down wind. Then suddenly he was pausing as the shapes of men and horses loomed before him. He shot his hand to his wet gun, wondering as he drew whether or not the weapon would fire. He was actually leveling the pistol when a voice arrested him.

"Hey, Dan! You fool, put down that gun!"

A shift in the wind showed him then who they were. It was Hale Steptoe, owner of the Valley City Mercantile and the Leaning S ranch, and a crew of his men plowing a fire line, one share immediately behind another. Already there were two rods of clean black furrows showing.

Dan let his arm fall, then they were crowding around him. Someone hollered: "It's that Baylor hellion, all right. I'll bet he started this blaze."

"That's a lot more of the same hogwash," rapped a familiar voice. It was Old Honus Blair.

Dan voiced the only protest. "Furrowin' against that blaze is a gamble, Honus. But there's no gamble about what Haggart an' his devils will do with Anne Foster. They had her chained up; I got her loose an' they just taken her back.

A puff of hot wind pushed aside the curtains of smoke. And Hale Steptoe was shouting: "Look! For God's sake, look!"

They whirled to stare. Less than a hundred yards away, Haggart and his men were grouped beneath a cottonwood tree, ringing the horse that held a pair of riders. Ropes had been looped about their necks, passed over a long limb and were being made fast to the bole Dan knew those two at once—Anne Foster and the Cottontop Kid!

IT SEEMED to release them. Dan and Old Honus led the concerted rush, guns spitting. The first volley of shots dropped the pair fixing those knots about the tree. The horses holding the Fosters leaped, dragging the loose ropes over the limb.

Dan took out after Haggart, scorning the man's reckless fire. But fate was against his settling his score with the man. Even as Dan ran, there was suddenly a shadow knifing at him—a slender shadow with white hair flying wildly. The Cottontop Kid!

As Dan whirled to divine the little outlaw's purpose, the Kid's boot lashed out. Dan went down, tripped. As he clambered up raging, gunfire thundered up ahead. The Kid came reeling out of the smoke, his gun fuming in his fist, blood streaming off the fingers.

Dan heard a faint, feminine cry. Anne came running to Billy Foster, folding him to her breast. As Dan came up, he heard the outlaw say: "It's all right, Sis. I got him. He's the fourth—an' the last!"

Honus Blair stuffed shells into his gun, regarding them with a wry grin. Hale Steptoe and some of the fire crew came up, their faces reflecting the satisfaction of a job well done. And John Gallant, county commissioner, pounded to the scene, coughing with the smoke.

"Honus," he barked, "I didn't more'n half believe what you told us about Dan Baylor an' the Cottontop Kid. But I've seen enough in the last five minutes to know it for gospel. Try an' forget the unkind things that folks has said an' take back the badge. We need a man like you in office, an' folks will be quick to admit it once they hear about this."

"Yeah," sneered the old lawdog. "Till the next affair where the law draws the losin' end from the outlaws. I wouldn't have the job as a gift. Besides, my cow outfit needs me an' Dan Baylor—an' the Cottontop Kid."

"To hell with yore outfit, Honus!" broke in Hale Steptoe. "I'll turn the whole hen-yard shebang under my iron an' really build it up for you. That is, providin' you go on sheriffin'."

"My way, gents?" Honus' eyes were sparkling.

"Your way, Honus," admitted Gallant. His eyes went to the Kid, who was moaning as he came around. "An' with deputies of yore own choosin'."

"Sold!" hollered Honus, and his grimy grin showed the pleasure of one who has seen his fat drawn from the fire. "You got you a sheriff, gents, an' you've made a promise I don't aim to let you forget."

Later they all rode back to Valley City together. The Cottontop Kid, bandaged and in some pain, but with hope stretching before him, rode in the van with Sheriff Honus Blair. Then came the men. Bringing up the rear was Dan Baylor and Anne.

Up ahead, Old Honus screwed in the saddle to look back at his deputy and the girl, a low chuckle of satisfaction escaping his lips. But when the Kid too would have cast his eyes back, the sheriff restrained him.

"Trouble with you, button,' he hoorawed, "is that you've never learned what to see an' what to be blind to. I am to put you through a course of sprouts when I hang a badge onto yore bosom. Take that back there, for instance. That naturally ain't no business for the sheriff's office. Only a justice of the peace or a skypilot can work that out. An' that—that's lesson Number One!"

THE END

Make sure you don't miss the special Anniversary Issue of "The World's Leading Western Magazine," by reserving your copy today! Your newsstand will have it December 1st!

Cattle King's Ultimatum

By KENNETH A. FOWLER

The vast Slant H range was no place for a drifting sodbuster to settle—Hard-fisted John Harbold, cattle-king, saw to that. . . . But one quiet, determined youngster decided he'd drifted far enough—and neither flame nor hot lead would change his mind!

JOHN HARBOLD reined in the steel-dust at the rim of the bluff, then abruptly stiffened, staring intently across the brown bottomlands to where Bluewater Creek came foaming down from the mesa to bring its crystal-bright waters into the crawling muddy dribble of Squaw River. None of his men were working in that section, but now John Harbold saw it distinctly—a thread of smoke stitched starkly against the pale blue backdrop of the sky.

Nesters! John Harbold's lips grimly locked. If it was, after all of that chicken-

"By God," Harbold marvelled, "of all the nervy, bullheaded young . . ." He broke off as his fingers clenched his gun-butt. . . .

livered breed that he'd run off the Slant H, and after all the warnings he'd given—

A cold gleam struck from the hardness of his stone-gray eyes; then with sudden angry violence he jerked the steeldust around and swung it into the trail that led downward into the valley.

The valley. . . .

A brooding nostalgia stirred in him as he remembered its tempestuous past, and suddenly he felt a curious dejection that it should now be so placid. He would have preferred it untamed and turbulent, the way it had been when he had first come to it as an untried stripling, fifty years ago. Then it had been like something fiercely and frenziedly alive, something that had to be battered into subjection by a power and a strength greater than its own. But now, except for these pussy-footing, weak-gutted nesters. . . .

He swore, several minutes later, as his horse sloshed squeamishly across rock-bottomed Bluewater Creek, and he glanced up to see that the nester already had a cabin completed. He saw, too, that in spite of its crude, imperfect carpentry, it had the look of being solidly and compactly built.

Well, he decided firmly, it would be no skin off his hide, damn it! If these people were such fools as to come pushing onto a cow range without first making inquiries, as any sensible person would do, then it was their own damned fault if their labor and effort all went for nothing.

As he drew nearer, he heard the heavy, measured thud of an ax, and topping a rise which had obscured his fuller view of the cabin, he came upon a man hunched over a chopping block in front of the place, splitting up logs for stove wood.

The man looked up casually as John Harbold approached, then dropped his glance and went on unconcernedly with his chopping. Grudgingly John Harbold admired the man's lean breadth of shoulder, the ripple of muscle along his flexed bronzed arm as he swung up the ax and brought it down with swift, true impact to cleave a solid wedge of wood cleanly through the center.

When he was close enough to make the man hear, John Harbold said: "You can't squat here, feller."

The man went on splitting wood. "Free range, isn't it?" he said without looking up.

"Free," conceded John Harbold with a contemptuously flung glance towards the cabin, "to those who're strong enough to hold it. The Slant H don't allow nesters."

"You from the Slant H?" The man picked up the wood he had just split and began arranging it in a neat pile beside the cabin.

"I own it," said John Harbold tersely. For a moment he thought he noticed a sudden startled reaction in the man's eyes.

Then the man straightened, resting one arm on the ax helve while he used the other to flick away the dewlike drops of sweat that clung to his forehead. "Well," he finally said, slowly, "I own this cabin. I built it. I aim to live in it!"

THE anger that had been slowly building in John Harbold since he had first noticed the puff of smoke from the bluff now diffused suddenly into a vague irritability. He felt the man's eyes coolly surveying him; he in turn swept the other from head to toe in cold, deliberate appraisal. The man wore faded jumpers that had been patched at both knees, and his gray flannel shirt was pasted wetly against his broad, lean-muscled back. But it was the man's calm, neutral blue eyes that held John Harbold's gaze longest, eyes that, when he thrust his spearing glance at them, looked back at him imperturbably without shrinking.

"Listen," John Harbold found himself

trying to keep the irritation from showing in his voice, "you'll have to fog on out. You should have made inquiries before you went ahead and threw up that shack."

"I did make inquiries," the man answered calmly. "They told me back in town that this was free range, only the Slant H didn't allow nesters." He spat deliberately on his hands and picked up the ax again, "I figgered what the Slant H didn't allow didn't make no difference, so long as it was legal free range."

An angry red mounted in John Harbold's face; then a corner of his mouth drew down in hard, stubborn resolve. "Nobody gives a damn," he said flatly, "what a piddling two-bit sod-smasher figures." He went on, clipping out the words with a cold incisiveness: "I'll give you twenty-four hours to clear out."

He started to wheel the steeldust away, then abruptly stopped. A woman with a baby pressed to her breast stepped suddenly from the doorway and stood regarding him with grave, pale-blue eyes. He noticed that her face had a paleness, too, as though the coming of the baby had drained some vital element of its freshness and beauty. Then, as his glance went from her twist of honey-yellow hair to the plain, faded gingham of her dress, he felt a strange pang, the pressure of an old, long-buried memory. . . . .

A faint tiredness seemed to drag at the woman's voice. "What is it, Tom?" she asked; then, quietly persisting as the man with the ax looked away from her toward John Harbold: "Tom, is it—trouble?"

"Not unless *he* makes it." The man stared challengingly at John Harbold. Then his glance crossed to the woman and his voice softened concernedly. "Now you go back inside," he urged gently, "and get some rest. There's no call to be worried."

"All right, Tom." She turned and started obediently through the doorway, then paused, her eyes coming back to him and clinging wistfully. "I'm not worried," she said in a faint voice. "I'm not, only—" she paused uncertainly—"only you were so sure—you said that here everything would be—" She let her voice fall, her words unfinished.

"I said everything would be all right, didn't I?" the man supplied quietly. "Well, everything will be, Kathy. Now you go on inside and lie down." He watched till she had gone, then calmly stooped and picked up another short log, laying it carefully across the block.

John Harbold felt a vague irritation at the note of defensiveness that crept into his voice. "It won't make any difference about the woman," he flung out harshly. "Remember, I said—"

With aggravating indifference, the nester swung up the ax and drove down with the full power of his body behind it, splitting the log into even halves. Then he turned and slowly brought his eyes up to John Harbold's.

"No," he said deliberately, "I didn't think you'd let that make any difference. Power's all you care anything about. Power—and pride." He added, stooping to pick up the wood and throw it over on the pile: "But you can't make me move by threats."

In sudden fury, John Harbold reined the steeldust around, then swung in the saddle. "It won't be by threats next time!" he flung back angrily. "You'll find out—"

His mouth shut with a snap. The nester was arranging another log on the block. John Harbold swore, then savagely wheeled the steeldust and headed it toward the creek bank.

THE stubborn fool, he thought wrathfully, the obstinate, headstrong young idiot! He felt the blood pound hotly at his temples as the horse negotiated the stony bottom of the stream bed and

pushed up through the screening willows on the opposite bank.

All right, he'd show the young upstart. Twenty-four hours, he'd said. He'd give the young fool that, and not a second more. Why, damn his gall—

His anger cooled suddenly. Gall? It was hardly that. It was the quality, rather, he always had thought no nester possessed—a cool and resolute fearlessness! It was a quality he always had professed to admire, rather than resent! It was, in fact, the very quality that had enabled him to build up, single-handed, the greatest cattle empire in the territory, the quality that had lifted him to a pinnacle of power and eminence among men who had dallied while he had acted, men who had been content to grub along after little things while he had gone after the big ones! Power. . . .

That young dirt-slinger had told him that was all he cared about. Well, was there anything wrong with power? And when a man had won it, was it wrong to feel pride in the achievement, pride in having carved out a cattle kingdom from a pinhead of land no bigger than that chunk the nester was squatted on back there?

Only, somehow, he didn't feel proud now, remembering the look in that woman's eyes, a look that made a dark and ugly blur against the window of his memory. The nester was right; pride wasn't always good. It was his damned pride that was stopping him right now from riding back there and telling the man he could stay, telling him to stay and welcome. But already he'd given the man twenty-four hours to get out, and his hard, stubborn pride would make him rigidly enforce the order.

Irritably, he tried to brush the thing from his mind, but it kept bobbing back with a curious, annoying persistence. What if he did kick this squatter out; there were plenty of other places where the fellow could go.

But the woman, the woman who had turned back his mind across the bridge of the years . . . . What about her? And the baby? The woman had made him think of a kid with the rickets he had seen once, she was so pale. But damn it, it wasn't any of his business. The man had been given his warning, and now, if he didn't go. . . .

John Harbold softly said, "Damn," then jabbed his spurs into the damp flank of the steeldust. "Come on, Mexican," he spoke with a flat tiredness in his voice, "let's you and me get on home. You've loafed long enough."

Knowingly, the horse lifted its ears and picked up its step. They dipped down through a dry wash and came up on the other side into a rolling meadow thickly clotted with sage. John Harbold drew the spicy scent deeply into his lungs, then lifted his eyes to the shadowy rim of hills that lay ahead.

He could see the ranch house now, a blur of white in the distance, with the westering sun striking balls of fire from the upper windows. Home. . . .

It was half an hour before he got there, but he found that his housekeeper, Martha Oldham, had, as usual, anticipated him.

"Where on earth have you been?" she scolded. "Supper's been waiting most an hour."

John Harbold seemed not to have heard her. He took off his pearl-gray Stetson and with an air of abstraction slapped it upon an elkhorn wall prong.

Then he turned and said suddenly: "Martha, send Dave up to me after supper, will you? I found a nester this morning holed up down on Bluewater Creek."

AS he saw Dave Oldham come striding up to the veranda later, John Harbold wondered if he would have succeeded as well as he had, these last several

years without the services of two such trusted and capable assistants as Dave and his sister, Martha. He knew that either one of them would go to the ends of hell and back for him, but he also knew that, strong as their loyalty was, neither had ever really pierced the barrier of reserve he had built up about himself through the years.

"Sit down, Dave," John Harbold invited as the stocky little foreman came up to the porch. "Dave," he began immediately, "I turned up a nester today down on Bluewater Creek."

"They come and go," remarked Dave Oldham noncommittally. "Mostly go."

"*Always* go," John Harbold pointedly corrected. "But this one today wasn't just another range tramp. He—well, damn it, I don't think he'll move till he's made to."

Dave Oldham sifted tobacco into the rice paper, shaped up a cigarette. He waited.

"I gave this hombre twenty-four hours to clear out," went on the Slant H owner, "but I think maybe we'll have to discourage him. I want you to send a man down there and watch. If he doesn't get out in twenty-four hours, you know what to do."

Dave Oldham lighted the cigarette, and the flare of the match in the gathering dusk momentarily lighted a dark-eyed, expressionless face. He took a deep drag, and then the light from the match flickered out and his voice came through the darkness: "All right, boss. But they don't do any harm, really."

"We never let 'em in before, did we?" John Harbold countered harshly. "Well, then, if we begin now we'll have every damned saddle-tramp between here and the Pecos cutting in on our range. Then the first thing you know we'll be starting to miss cattle. Besides," he brought up as a final, inescapable argument, "what are people going to say if we start softening up on riffraff like that?"

Oldham got up. "I'll look after it," he said shortly. "Anything else on your mind?"

"No," murmured John Harbold absently, "I guess not tonight, Dave."

Oldham said. "Well, then, good-night, boss."

"Good-night, Dave."

A queer feeling of loneliness ran through him. Good old reliable Dave, he thought. Yet there was always that barrier, that defensive reserve he had thrown up around himself to discourage intimacy. . . . And to shut off the present from the past.

A long breath escaped lingeringly from his thoughtfully pursed lips; then he reached into his case for a cigar, and selecting one, carefully lighted it. A coolness had come into the air and suddenly he had a curious sense of this coolness wrapping itself around him, settling in cold, heavy layers against his heart. Nerves. For some damned reason, he was jumpy as a colt tonight.

HE took a few jerky puffs on his cigar; somehow it tasted flat, bitter. He found his mind straying back to the nester, irked by qualms he couldn't explain. He'd never felt like this before when he'd thrown out squatters, but before no one had ever stood up to him the way this fellow had. He'd driven off those others because he'd hated their spinelessness as much as for any other reason. But this young fellow with his pale, blue-eyed wife, and the baby. . . . .

Damn it, he had to kick the blasted young fool out now, if only to save his own face! Besides, hadn't he gotten where he was today by never permitting his personal feelings to mix with business? He'd been hard and uncompromising because that was the way a man had to be to get ahead, because the world was hard and uncompromising too, and a man had to fight it with his own weapons. He wondered, though, what it would have

been like now if he *had* compromised, just once. Just once, when. . . .

He suddenly flung away the tasteless half-smoked cigar and stared off blankly into the darkness. A man didn't backtrack, at his age. The past was dead, and a man had to look ahead.

A step sounded behind him and a soft voice said, "I think I'll say good-night, John. It's getting late."

"Oh." He turned in his chair and saw Martha Oldham's placid, friendly face framed in the spread of light from the doorway. "Shucks, Martha," he said impulsively, "this isn't late. Come on out and set a spell. This air'll do you good."

Martha Oldham took the chair her brother had occupied. "Just a few minutes, then," she conceded reluctantly.

He tried to scrutinize her in the dim light from the doorway. Suddenly he said, "Martha, what's wrong with me, anyway?"

He saw her start, was conscious of her glance concernedly searching him. "Wrong?" she echoed bewilderedly. "Why, what do you mean, John?"

He swept his arm vaguely outward. "All that," he muttered. "The Slant H. The thing I built up out of blood and sweat and strife. All mine, every bit of it. Only—oh, I don't know. It's just that—well, now that it's finished—" He stopped, suddenly inarticulate.

For a long moment neither of them spoke, and the great night silence was like a vast, impalpable barrier dropped between them. At last she said, quietly, "You've never been one to invite a confidence, John."

"Don't I know that?" he fired back at her irritably. He fumbled in his case for another cigar, lighted it hopefully. The taste was gone. He flung it abruptly over the railing.

"There ought to have been a woman in your life, John," Martha Oldham said softly. "When you were fighting and struggling to build all this, you didn't notice the lack. But now, when everything you wanted is yours, when you've finally got what you fought and struggled so hard to attain—well, it's. . . . It's all just—"

"Emptiness," supplied John Harbold harshly. "Go ahead and say it, why don't you?"

"Yes," Martha Oldham's voice was a sympathetic murmur in the darkness, "Yes, I suppose it must seem that way to you sometimes. But there are good years ahead of you yet, John, if you want to make them so."

Silence fell between them again; then after a moment she said, "I think I'd better go in now. It's getting chilly out here."

"No, don't go yet, Martha. Please." Some desperate urgency in his voice held her there, swung her eyes expectantly to his. His voice softened, seemed to push through the darkness as if groping for something hidden from his gaze, yet there, to be reached for, grasped.

"Martha," he got out, "there *was* a a woman in my life, once. My—my wife."

FOR a moment a straining silence lay between them; then Martha Oldham said faintly, "I didn't know, John. You never told—"

"She and the boy left me." He heard her tiny gasp quenched by the darkness. The words jammed in his throat, but he forced them out stubbornly. "I was a hard man, Martha. I thought a cow was more important than a wife. I—I never neglected the cow, Martha."

"I'm sorry, John." Her voice went to him tremulously through the shadows. "I—I wish it could have been different for you."

"I don't know, Martha. All life is a growing away, a forgetting. Look at the way a mother worships her baby. Yet she knows that some day the child will grow away from her, desert her for someone

else. It's cruel—and natural." A weary note of resignation crept into his voice. "Yes, that's all life is, Martha; a growing away from things, and then trying to forget."

Martha Oldham stood up. "You haven't forgotten, John."

His sigh whispered through the night. "No, Martha, I haven't forgotten. . . ."

After she had gone, he reached mechanically for his cigar case, then withdrew his hand, empty. The silence pulsed in his ears like a distant throbbing of drums, the dark, accusing silence that would let him forget neither the pain, nor the memory. . . .

The next morning John Harbold was called unexpectedly to Cheyenne on business, and he didn't see Dave Oldham till late afternoon of the day following. He found the foreman down at the corral, supervising the selection of a remuda for a beef gather that was to take place later in the week.

He said at once: "Dave, what'd you do about that nester I spoke to you about the other night?"

"Just what you told me to do," Oldham answered shortly.

"You—you mean he didn't get out?"

"That's right," an undercurrent of resentment ran through the foreman's voice, "he didn't get out."

John Harbold felt the chill behind the words. "Well," he was conscious of how lame his defense sounded, "we couldn't let a young squirt of a nester dictate to the Slant H. I reckon he'll find some other place to go."

"Reckon so?" Oldham countered coldly.

John Harbold stared, aware of the implication of rebuke in the foreman's stiff rejoinder. Suddenly he decided, "Rope a couple of horses, Dave. We'll ride down to the creek and take a look-see."

"But boss, I've got all this—"

"Two horses, Dave," John Harbold quietly repeated.

The foreman roped the steeldust for John Harbold, a sturdy little grulla for himself. They mounted, and for the first fifteen minutes rode in silence. Then John Harbold offered hesitantly: "I can savvy why you didn't like that job, Dave. But it had to be done."

"Did it?" said Dave Oldham flatly.

Suddenly John Harbold felt the old doubts and misgivings torturing him again. Why *had* it been necessary to throw that young squatter out? Hadn't it been simply because he, John Harbold, hadn't been able to stand having his authority questioned? Hadn't it been because he had decreed that the young sodbuster could have twenty-four hours to clear out, and not a minute longer? Hadn't it been because he had rated pride and power above human justice and human decency?

He recalled the quietly resolute way in which the squatter had stood him off in the face of his threats. And he remembered, with a sharply gnawing sense of guilt, the pale, delicate beauty of the woman who had had the baby feeding at her breast. Kathy, the man had called her. It was a pretty name. But she hadn't looked strong. Not strong enough, if she and her husband were faced with a long trip out of the country. . . .

WITH angry abruptness, he turned on Dave Oldham. "Damn it, Dave," he burst out hotly, "what the devil's eating you? You haven't done a thing but grunt and look sour from the time we started!"

Dave Oldham hitched himself around in the kak and stared at John Harbold with a curious glance. "There's nothin' eatin' at me, boss," he emphasized quietly. "But—" He checked himself suddenly, and finished in a dull tone, "Oh, never mind, now."

John Harbold sensed vaguely some reservation, something hidden and held back from him. Well, if Dave Oldham had something he wanted to keep to him-

self, why not? Had he ever invited his foreman's confidence? Had he ever repaid those long years of loyalty and hard work with anything but hard cash and a gruff acceptance of a fidelity that was impossible to be measured in mere dollars and cents?

No, he had not. And Martha Oldham had been right. He had attained everything he had set out to attain. . . . And the result was emptiness. Queer, though, that whenever he thought of Martha—

A sharp cry from Dave Oldham sheered abruptly into his thought. The foreman was reined in halfway down the shale-strewn slope that led to the creek, pointing across to the opposite bank.

A gasp broke from John Harbold as his eyes followed the line of Dave Oldham's outstretched arm. A charred, heaped-up ruin was all that remained of the nester's shack, but Oldham was pointing farther back, towards a grassy knoll on which a crude lean-to had been newly erected.

Under the lean-to sat a woman holding a baby, and not far away from her stood a man in patched, dirt-stained range garb —a man furiously at work peeling pine logs for another cabin!

John Harbold's face stiffened into an expression of blank incredulity as he recognized the young nester whom he had warned away two days before. "By God," he marveled, "of all the nervy, bull-headed, young—"

He started to rein the steeldust down toward the creek, and at the same time his fingers clenched on the butt of his gun. Then he stopped as Dave Oldham blurted, "For God's sake, boss, wait!"

JOHN HARBOLD stared in bewilderment at the look of stark dread etched on the foreman's face.

"Wait till you've cooled down, boss!" Oldham pleaded hoarsely. "Don't go down there feelin' like this."

A faint smile flicked at John Harbold's rigidly drawn lips. "Seems like you're the one needs to cool down, Dave." He dropped his reins, then crossed his arms and settled himself more comfortably in the saddle. "You're reading the sign all wrong, Dave," he said quietly. "What's eating you, anyway?"

Sudden relief drained the tautness from Dave Oldham's face. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "It was just that—well, from the way you talked I was afraid you was goin' down there and shoot the scalp off the boy!"

"You know, Dave," John Harbold squinted reminiscently above the hand forked under his stubbled gray chin, "that lad reminds me of the way I was, back in the days when we were fighting to build up the Slant H with nothing but a shoestring and a couple of busted-down cows between us and the grubline. He's the kind that goes through, Dave—come hell or high water!"

"Yeah." A long breath gusted from Dave Oldham.

"He's got the right stuff, Dave—if he uses it right." He added in a tone of abstraction: "I'd like to help him—if he'd let me."

Dave Oldham said eagerly: "That'd be fine, boss!" He hesitated, then got out reluctantly: "Boss, I meant to tell you this before, only—well, I don't guess I savvied just how to say it."

A curious feeling of expectancy ran through John Harbold, and suddenly he was remembering the foreman's confusion back on the trail, when he had started to say something and then had stopped. "Tell me now, Dave," he encouraged quietly.

"Well," Oldham stammered, "we didn't find out till after we'd burned the cabin. . . . You see, some of the boys snooped around a bit and that's how we got on to it that—oh, hell, boss, that lad down there puttin' up the new cabin is your own son!"

JOHN HARBOLD'S face went stiffly white under its beard-stubbled bronze, but otherwise his only sign of emotion was a slight forward adjustment of his body as he leaned down to knuckle his fingers tightly around the saddle horn. For a long moment he maintained this rigid posture, his eyes staring vaguely out across the rolling range, his lean-jawed face knotted inscrutably.

Dave Oldham regarded him anxiously. "You see, boss," he explained haltingly, "the boy figgered you'd got your start on this Bluegrass range, and that he could do the same. But—well, he kind of holds some things against you, and when you told him he'd have to clear out in twenty-four hours, it kind of got his dander up."

Dave Oldham paused, his glance searching the face of the man who sat the steeldust. "I reckon though," he kept falteringly on, "that if you was to go down there and—and sort of talk things over—"

John Harbold's lips drew taut. Abruptly he picked up his reins and wheeled the steeldust back towards the Slant H.

"But boss," expostulated Dave Oldham, "aren't you goin' down and—why, damn it, he's your own son, boss!"

John Harbold's voice fell to a husky whisper. "Yes, he's my own son, Dave. But me, I'm not worthy to be his father!"

John Harbold rode with his gaze fixed on the shale-covered ground beneath him. Strangely, he was remembering now the words that Martha Oldham had spoken to him that night on the veranda. Those words had been with him, stirring troubledly through his consciousness, ever since.

"There are good years ahead of you, John," Martha had said, "if you want to make them so."

He remembered the calm, sweet sound of her voice as she had said it; saw her gentle face faintly luminous the way it had been that night, in the spray of light from the doorway. " . . . if you want to make them so!"

John Harbold felt a sudden leaping hope in his heart. Why shouldn't he make them so? Why was it too late? Why couldn't he and Martha . . .

They were nearly back to the ranch house before he turned to Dave Oldham and said: "Dave, I want you to ride to Cheyenne for me tomorrow and come back with my lawyer, Harry Edwards. And by the way, you're fired."

"Fired!" blurted out Dave Oldham. "But—" He stopped suddenly as a reassuring smile dissolved the hardness from around John Harbold's mouth.

"I'm quitting, Dave," John Harbold resumed tranquilly, "quitting for the first time in my life. And the Slant H is no more. Beginning tomorrow it will become the Slant HO, the joint property of two of the stubbornest damn fools I know—Tom Harbold and Dave Oldham."

"But—but God in Heaven, boss—" Dave stammered.

"Didn't I tell you you were fired?" sternly interrupted John Harbold. "Well then, damn it, shut up!"

The ranch house loomed ahead, cool and inviting under the shade of two great cottonwoods.

John Harbold heeled the steeldust. He'd ask her tonight. There'd be good years yet, plenty of good years, with a trail-mate like Martha. . . .

Don't miss the smashing Anniversary Issue of "The World's Leading Western Magazine"—on your newsstand Dec. 1st! An all-star lineup of all-star stories, featuring two dramatic frontier novels!

APPRENTICED TO THE

Thrilling novelette of a blood-money outcast

CHAPTER ONE

A Gun-Guest for the Dutchman

THE KID awoke that morning with a splitting head, and when he stirred, the pain started at his right shoulder blade and traveled all the way to the tips of his fingers. He had, at first, no very clear idea of where he was. Above

OWLHOOT

By HERBERT A. WOODBURY

"We can't take the kid with us; we can't leave him here. We got to kill him!" Young Jim Vance, wounded fugitive, heard tough Red Fallon tell Nick. But Nick had his own notion about who must die before the posse came. . . . A deep, cunning plan which would forever mortgage the youngster to the twisted, tragic life of an owlhoot outcast!

Clutching the gun, the kid cried, "Nick!"

him, mesquite branches formed a roof against a hot, brassy morning sun. In his nostrils was the odor of wood smoke and frying bacon. And in his ears was the sound of Red's arguing, angry voice.

"There's only one way out of this, Nick. We can't take the kid with us. Likewise, we can't leave him here. We got to kill him!"

The kid tried moving a little, and this time, for the minute, the pain of the bullet wound was so complete that he missed the voices. Then he heard again.

"The wash has stopped risin', Nick. By noon, it'll be low enough for the posse to come across. You and me, alone can reach the buttes ahead of 'em. . . ."

Young Jim Vance couldn't see the speaker, nor the man to whom he was talking. They were in a little willow brake about thirty paces away from the camp. But the kid knew that Red Fallon was doing the talking.

"And as for leavin' the kid here, you know what that means, Nick. Five thousand dollars on your head. Three on mine. And a full pardon to anybody—*anybody*, Nick, that turns us in. He knows we'd have rode to the buttes. He knows the trail in. Mebbe he ain't in no condition

to ride that trail after us, but he don't need to. He jest dickers with the posse for his share of the reward; makes sure of his pardon, and then. . . . What's to prevent him, Nick, from directin' the posse after us?"

Jim Vance, nineteen years old, continued to lie very quietly there in the shade of the mesquite clump. He knew now where he was. Four days ago, he had set out with Red Fallon and Red's brother, Nick, from the Fallon brothers' hide-out in the buttes above Green River, on what was to have been a trip to Chloride City.

The kid and the two notorius bandits hadn't got as far as their destination, however. In the little cowtown of Four Corners where the two brothers had paused for a drink, a lawman had recognized the Fallons, and Nick Fallon had shot the marshal dead. Nick and Red, with young Jim Vance accompanying them, had then turned back on their trail. Fleeing town amidst a hail of bullets, they had commenced a retreat back toward the hideout in the buttes.

In a torrential desert thunder storm, they'd reached the south rim of Big Muddy Wash, last night. They'd plunged their ponies into the rising waters, and had reached the north bank and safety, just a split second before a roaring thirty-foot wall of flood water had come sweeping down the wash. The pursuing posse had been marooned behind them on the south bank. But the posse was within rifle range.

AS Jim Vance and the two Fallon brothers fled north, there'd come a blistering rifle volley from behind them. In the inky blackness, Red and Nick Fallon had been lucky. The kid hadn't been.

A steel jacketed Winchester .30-30 had caught Jim Vance in the back of his right shoulder, and he had gone catapulting from his saddle into the mud.

That had been the end, Jim had thought as he'd lost consciousness, last night. Only, apparently it hadn't been the end, because now he'd awakened this morning in the shade of a mesquite clump, to find his shoulder bandaged and to hear Red Fallon regretting his merciful humanitarian impulse of the night before.

Red was saying: "If the rain had kept up, we could have taken him back to the buttes with us. But the wash'll be down by noon. The posse'll be comin' across, and—"

Nick's voice cut in: "And so you'd kill the kid. Shoot him down like a dog, jest because. . . . Nope, Red. Posse'd overtake us long before we reached the buttes with him, I'll admit. But I got another way. We don't take him all the way to the buttes. We leave him in Snake Canyon. With the Dutchman."

The kid still lay there. He'd felt a little surge of warmth flood through him as he'd heard Nick stand up for him.

Now he felt cold again as he heard Red cry, "And how far do you think you could trust the Dutchman? This ain't last year, Nick. There wasn't no reward last year, nor this offer of amnesty to the hombre who turns us in. Sure, the Dutchman *used* to help us because we paid him. Only now, the law'll pay him a whole lot more than we can. No, Nick! By God, no!"

Red's voice mounted, and the kid lay listening. Only the kid hadn't the slightest idea that events were approaching melodrama. The next came, as far as the kid was concerned, like a bolt out of the blue. He heard Red's voice rise. "By God, no! You can risk *your* fool neck for the kid if you want to. But you ain't riskin' mine!" And then . . .

Not seeing either of them, the kid hadn't visualized it. How could he? They were renegades, of course, but they were brothers, too—blood-brothers. And there in your mind's eye, you certainly didn't picture two blood-brothers . . .

But Red Fallon cried, "But you ain't riskin' mine!"

And then there was the shot.

The kid's eyes closed. Silence had followed the shot. For a long minute not a sound came from the willow brake, while the kid lay there waiting. And thinking. . . . In a minute he was going to die. Red was going to walk out of the willow clump and shoot him. It was too late now to wonder whether he should have played his hand out differently. But there for the minute, the kid wondered about it. *Could* he have played the hand any differently? With the same cards that had been dealt him?

Jim Vance let his thoughts sift back. Skim over most of it. . . . His childhood hadn't been much different from any other Texas childhood, except that, maybe, his dad had been a lot richer than most kids' dads. Skip that part, though, and begin with Lou. . . .

Lou was the girl the kid's dad had married two years ago, just a year after his mother had died. What should he have done about Lou? The night when his dad had been away in Fort Worth, and when Lou had brought that handsome young tinhorn into the house, thinking the kid was gone.

What *should* he have done?

Lying helpless this morning, waiting for Red, the kid pondered it. Only it still came out to the same answer. There'd been only one thing to do about Lou as he'd entered the house, innocently unaware of what was going on, just as they were unaware of his entrance. He couldn't have played that part of the hand differently. If he had it all to do over again, he'd still send Lou back into the hall, and then take that white-faced dude tinhorn outside. . . . The tinhorn, badly beaten, had left town abruptly that same night. Then. . . .

How could the kid have told his dad about Lou? Dad'd have blown his brains out if he'd gone to Dad with any such apparently lying story. And rightly too! For dad loved her, and he wouldn't have believed. . . . And anyway, you don't tell on a woman, no matter what kind of woman she is. . . .

And so the kid got out.

He doubted if he could have played the next part of the hand any differently, either, and still played it honorably. There was the night in Carson City six months ago, when he'd gotten into the brawl with the hombre who'd cheated him at cards. He'd knocked the man down, and the man had smashed his head on the brass bar rail. He died fifteen minutes afterward.

JIM VANCE shook his head. Dad *could* have helped him, maybe. Hired a high-priced lawyer and fought it out in the courts. Perhaps if dad, ruler of the vast Vance cattle kingdom, had been there, the jury wouldn't have looked on Jim as a no-good saddle-tramp. Maybe the judge wouldn't have packed him off to prison for ten years. And maybe, there in prison, he wouldn't have met Nick Fallon. . . .

No, thought the kid, none of it could have been different. Except maybe the answer he'd given Nick Fallon, back in prison that day. For Nick had talked him into a jail-break. If he'd known then that Nick was one of the notorious Fallon brothers, he wouldn't have fled prison with him. But Nick had been in prison under an alias, and ten years had seemed such a long time for the kid to wait to breathe fresh air again. . . .

He'd fled with Nick to the hideout in the buttes above Green River. After that he'd become a member of Nick's gang. Nick had kept him, fed him at the hideout, hadn't he, while the law-dogs were futilely hunting him? He'd been plenty nervous about going out on any raids with Nick, but when he and Red had announced four days ago that they were taking him along

on a trip to Chloride City, what could he do? He was bounden to Nick, wasn't he? He was in Nick's debt. . . .

THE little minute which followed the crash of the shot in the willow clump spun itself out, and the kid still lay there, his eyes closed. Only when he finally heard the step he opened his eyes. He'd lost too much blood last night to have an ounce of physical strength left. But he could look death in the eye like a man. . . . He'd played his cards the best he knew how. If his best hadn't been good enough, he still hadn't done anything to be ashamed of. . . .

The footsteps came nearer, and slowly the kid turned his head. Then he caught his breath. For it wasn't Red coming out of the willow brush—it was Nick! The kid felt a surge of happiness, of release and thankfulness.

Lots of folks considered Nick even blacker than his brother, like the law which had a reward of five thousand dollars on Nick's head, and only three on Red's. Only, thought the kid, the law didn't know the real Nick, ruthless killer though he was. The kid had shuddered at some of Nick's accounts of his exploits, but he needn't shudder at Nick now.

He felt a rush of gratitude to Nick. Nick had saved his life. Rather than see a defenseless saddle-mate murdered, Nick had shot and killed his own blood-brother. In the midst of his happiness, the kid felt a little wave of horror, too. Putting it that way; saying that Nick had killed his brother made it sound—well, not so good. The kid wished Nick didn't look quite so calm, so poised and collected, so utterly lacking in feeling as he came out of the willow clump. . . .

Nick looked down at him from fathomless cold blue eyes. Then without a word, he walked over to the camp fire; squatted down, and commenced wolfing a hearty breakfast.

The kid closed his eyes again. He didn't know how long he'd slept, but it had been a long time, apparently. The hot, brassy morning sun had climbed in the clear blue heavens. Over the kid's head was no longer the roof of lacy mesquite branches. Instead, he was tied on a clumsy travois made of saplings and rope, attached to a horse. Nick was taking him— What had Red objected to as foolhardy and dangerous? Nick was taking him to the Dutchman's in Snake Canyon.

They came up over the smooth granite shoulder of a red mountain, and then they dropped down into a tiny rainbow canyon where a gray, weathered cabin sat in the shade of two mighty cottonwoods. Nick couldn't have been any more kind or gentle or considerate of his wounded comrade's comfort.

It was about noon, the kid judged from the sun. Just about the time when Red had predicted that the posse, back there ten-fifteen miles or so, would be crossing Big Muddy Wash. Only, the thought of the pursuing posse didn't make Nick panicky like it had made Red. . . .

LEADING the pony with the dragging litter, Nick rode into the little cabin yard, and shouted, "Hi, folks!"

The kid heard a door open and close; the sound of bare feet hurrying through gravel. So this was the Dutchman, who, in the past had done favors for Nick and his outlaw brother?

Turning his head, the kid saw a girl. . . . She was a little younger than the kid, say seventeen, maybe. She had honey-colored, wavy hair, and some sort of gingham dress that fitted tightly around the upper part of her body. Then the kid was looking up into two brown eyes that were staring down into his drawn, bloodless face in soft womanly compassion. Nick did the talking.

Nick said, "The Dutchman ain't here, eh?"

The girl shook her head, still staring down at Jim.

Nick cleared his throat. "Well, you tell him when he comes back that Nick was here. Tell him Nick left a pardner. I'll be back in two-three weeks with five hundred dollars for him if the kid's here safe and in shape to travel. Tell him that."

Into Nick's eyes for a second came a glimmer of cold, cruel ugliness. "But tell him that's all there is in it for him. He'd better not git no notions of tryin' to collect five thousand dollars. If I hear—and I will hear—he's taken the kid in to the law, or, if I ride back here into what smells like a trap . . ."

Nick's voice came more slowly. He measured his words, and there was cold, deadly menace in Nick's voice. "I'll git him, sister. . . . Tell him that! It may take weeks, months, years. . . . But if he tries to double-cross me, he's playin' with fire. I'll out-ride any trap, and he knows it. And then, some day, when he ain't expectin' me, I'll be back."

The girl still hadn't said anything. She still stood there looking down at Jim. In compassion, and in a sort of dazed, shocked bewilderment, too.

She lifted her eyes, and looked at Nick. "I'll tell him. . . ."

Nick had loosed the shafts of the travois from the horse. He indicated to the girl that she was to take one end of the litter while he took the other. Between them, they carried Jim into the cabin. Nick lifted him from the litter onto a bed. Then Nick repeated with the same deadly menace what he'd said before: "Tell him, sister, I'll git him, if it takes me twenty years!"

The girl nodded.

A minute later, Jim Vance heard the sound of Nick's pony breaking into a lope. Nick, with all the time he'd wasted at a slow walk, still had a ten-fifteen mile jump on the posse. Once Nick made the buttes, he was safe. . . .

The kid regarded the girl. She didn't look like Lou's kind. She brought him water; and some oatmeal gruel. And she still regarded him with that same, half-puzzled, half-bewildered expression with which she'd looked at him out in the yard.

The kid wondered about her. She didn't seem like the kind that'd be the daughter of the Dutchman.

Wondering about it, the kid closed his eyes, and went off again into his heavy, exhausted sleep. When he awakened that next time, it was twilight. In the cabin yard, he could hear voices. He trembled.

CHAPTER TWO

Once a Lawman—

OUTSIDE, a man's voice was rising. "And I tell you Pete, they *must* have stopped here. The girl's lyin'. We'll search the cabin."

The other voice cut in instantly. "You'll apologize to a lady, Dan, and do it pronto! You ain't talkin' to none of the Dutchman's white-trash kin. These folks that's got the cabin now, are. . . ."

The voice trailed for an instant; the speaker evidently turned to the girl. "Your word's good enough for me, Linda. You say they didn't ride by here. So, they didn't. Come on, boys!"

In the ranch yard there was the pound of hoot-beats as the posse rode away.

After a minute, the girl came back into the cabin, and the kid heard her rattling pots and pans on the old stove. A while after that, she came in with more oatmeal gruel. She drew up a chair to the kid's bedside; sat there spooning the gruel into his mouth. Then all of a sudden, she blurted out. "You don't remember me, do you?"

She went on before the kid could answer. "But I remember you. A year ago, near Alkali Wells, just before we lost our ranch. You rode in one night, looking

for work. And we didn't have any work for you because. . . . Well, because we knew then that we couldn't hang onto the ranch much longer. So we sent you on your way—without even feeding you. . . ."

She paused a minute, but the kid didn't say anything.

If the incident had seemed important to her, it hadn't, he was afraid, to him. He hadn't even remembered. He couldn't, even now, place the girl. Alkali Wells? Hell, lots of folks had turned him out without feeding him. In Nevada, Utah, Wyoming and Kansas. . . . After he'd run away from home, he'd made the discovery that it was a lot tougher working for strangers than it had been working for an indulgent dad who owned most of a whole Texas range county.

In the twilit room the girl's voice came again. "And after you left that night, I wondered about you. You looked so tired, so down and out as you rode away, that I. . . . We hadn't meant to be inhospitable. We'd just been thoughtless. But it worried me. What if our turning you hungry had meant . . . ?"

The kid caught the gist of it. He still didn't remember the incident or the girl; but he could see what she was driving at. "You wondered," he said, "if your turnin' me out hungry had given me a push down the road to hell? And then when you seen me, today, with Nick, you reckoned it had. So that was why—"

"Why I didn't tell him that the Dutchman and his family didn't live here any more. I wanted to take you in, and make it up to you. I mean. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

The kid nodded again. "Shore, Linda. And that was why you lied to the posse, too. Because you figgered mebbe I wouldn't have ended up in company like Nick's if you'd fed me, that night." He looked at her levelly in the dying dusk.

In her tanned, healthy face, he saw again the bright, shining radiance and loveliness which had convinced him in the beginning that she couldn't be the daughter of a hombre who'd deal with the Fallons. He felt a stab of nostalgia which for the minute hurt worse than his shattered shoulder.

He said quietly, "And the rest of the story is that while you're nursin' me back to health, you expect to reform me. I mean, there wouldn't be much point in havin' lied to the posse, if I left here only to team up with Nick again, would there?"

LINDA was silent. The kid's lips twisted, still in the hurt pain of the nostalgia. There in his mind's eye, he visualized the little scene which had taken place in the willow brake, this morning. He saw Nick Fallon sweeping for a gun, shooting his own brother, so as to save Jim Vance's life. He thought back to how gently Nick had guided the dragging litter over the uneven ground. Then he looked at the girl.

"What would you do, Linda, if I told you I couldn't reform?"

"Couldn't . . . ?"

"That I was bounden to Nick," he went on quietly. "But you ain't bounden to me, Linda. This debt you think you owe me don't exist exceptin' in your mind. I didn't go to hell the night you turned me out. I didn't start to hell until . . ."

He didn't tell her about his dad. He began it with the barroom brawl in Carson City. He brought it up to this morning, and then he included this morning. He told her of Nick killing his own brother in order to keep Red from killing him.

It didn't occur to him that he was bidding for her sympathy. That wasn't what he wanted—any more of her compassion. All he wanted was to make her see it in the clear light of logic—that she didn't owe him anything; but that he owed Nick a lot.

He said, "So you see, Linda, the story can't end the way you're figgerin' on its

endin'. When I ride out of here—if I *do* ride out of here—I'm ridin' with Nick. I owe him that much."

She was still silent, and he added, "I jest wanted to tell you, Linda. If you want to go on keepin' me here because you're afraid of Nick, why—why that's up to you. But you'll have to decide it all yourself, because I—I. . . . You see, don't you, Linda?"

She still didn't answer him. If he had aroused her sympathy; if there were tears in her eyes, it was too dark for the kid to see the tears.

She got up and said quietly, "You'd better rest, partner. . . ."

NICK FALLON had brought the kid on Wednesday to the shack which he believed was the Dutchman's. Thursday and Friday passed with the kid sleeping most of the time; not noticing particularly that the household here at the cabin seemed to consist of only himself and the girl.

It wasn't until Saturday that he asked her, in sudden astonishment, now that he thought about it, "You don't live here by yourself, do you?"

Linda shook her head. "Sometimes lately dad's *had* to leave me alone, when he gets a two weeks' hauling contract at Chloride City, I can't go with him. There's the stock here."

She added swiftly, seeing the look in Jim's face. "Don't think he likes to leave me, partner. Or that he would, if he could help it. Back when we lived in Alkali Wells, whenever he went out on a man-hunt . . ."

Jim started. "On a—?"

She nodded. "He was deputy there, for two years." Then she harped back. "Whenever he went out, he always got some of the neighbors to stay with me. Only there aren't any neighbors here. And we've got to eat next winter. . . . The hauling job means cash, and well, I reckon when you're poor you've got to do some things different from the way you'd do 'em if you were rich."

She went out of Jim's room and about her chores. The next day, Jim was out of bed to help her. She objected. She pointed out that even Nick, who certainly wasn't the type to pamper folks, hadn't expected him to be up and around for two-three weeks. She told him he was risking a hemhorrage and a relapse.

The kid told her—and meant it—that he'd be damned if he stay in bed any longer and let a girl wait on him. . . .

He had dizzy spells those first few days. At the start, his was a willingness more of the iron spirit than of the flesh. He couldn't do the simplest tasks that he tried to do. Lifting a bale of hay was impossible. Paring potatoes left him as weak as if he'd broken up a cattle stampede. Still, he tottered around, and got a little stronger, and did more with each succeeding day.

A whole second week went by. The kid fell into the habit of watching the horizon when he wasn't working; or even when he was. . . . Nick had said that he'd return in two-three weeks. What if Nick returned today? Or tomorrow, before the girl's dad got back from Chloride City? What could he say to Nick? Could he make Nick see that he had to stay here, helping the girl until after her dad returned? Nick had first claim on him, didn't he? Or did the girl who'd lied to the posse and nursed him back to health have a claim, now, too?

Two more days went by, and Nick

The great Anniversary Issue of *Dime Western* featuring two dramatic novels by Coburn and Farrell, plus novelettes and shorts, will be yours on December 1st—at your newsstand!

didn't ride in. Days, the kid did his chores. Twilights, and sometimes after the twinkling desert stars came out, the kid sat on the cabin stoop with Linda.

He'd told himself that he mustn't fall in love with the girl. Only it had been too late when he'd first warned himself of the danger. He'd been in love with her from the first moment when her eyes had met his in their deep compassion. Each succeeding day of propinquity had only made it worse. Dark, desperate thoughts filled the kid those last few nights that he sat alone with the girl in the deepening lavender dusk. . . .

HE thought once of selling Nick out. Why not? Why shouldn't he make the dicker with the law that Red had been afraid he'd make? Offer to lead a posse through the secret trail into Nick's hideout, in exchange for . . . He wouldn't want the reward, he guessed; the five thousand dollars blood money. But he could use the pardon!

If the governor pardoned him for his killing the man in the brawl in Carson City and for his subsequent jail break, why then he'd be free. . . . He could stay here in the little cabin in Snake Creek forever. Linda's dad wouldn't ever have to leave her alone again.

And then, sometimes, he had another temptation.

Leave Nick out of it, if he couldn't solve that problem. Forget Nick! Forget everything except that he and Linda were sitting here together in the starlight! Just live for the instant, for tonight, and let tomorrow take care of itself. She wouldn't fight him, struggle, he knew. He could look into her soul. He knew, without her having had to tell him, that she loved him, too. Just as desperately as he loved her!

That was all that the kid's dark desperate thoughts amounted to, though. Just the constant temptation which he was strong enough to fight down. There in his soul, he knew that he couldn't sell out Nick. And he knew that he couldn't make love to Linda Carnes. . . . A couple of weeks ago, he'd been able to tell himself that he'd played his cards in the only way that an honorable man could play them. He wanted to go on thinking that.

He sat there in the starlight with Linda, the night before the day that was to be the pay-off. The girl's hand found its way into his.

Linda said, "Life's funny, isn't it, Jim?" And he let it go at that. Life *was* funny. The problems, the messes, a hombre could get into without meaning to. . . .

Along in the forenoon that next morning, a rider appeared on the horizon. It wasn't Nick. It was the girl's dad, George Carnes, returning from Chloride City. He'd come through the little cattle town where, two weeks ago Nick Fallon had shot the marshal dead. George Carnes had heard the story of the shooting. And because, once he'd been a lawman himself, he'd listened pretty carefully both to the story and to the description of the kid who'd been with the Fallon brothers, that day.

So when George Carnes rode into his cabin yard and met Jim Vance, all he needed to do was to put two and two together. . . .

And Linda lied to her dad just as she'd lied to the posse. Linda swore that Jim was merely a wandering puncher who'd been riding the grub-line. But George Carnes had heard Jim described, and had even heard that the posse had "mistakenly" trailed Nick Fallon and his unidentified companion to the Carnes cabin in Snake Canyon.

Watch for the January Anniversary Issue—on sale December 1st!

Well, once you'd been a lawman, you were always one. George Carnes drew his gun and covered the kid; told the kid that he was a prisoner and that he was going to take him back to Four Corners.

And the kid? Jim turned to Linda. Linda was sobbing. Linda was saying it all, now, unashamed—what she hadn't said, there in the starlight, last night.

Linda was crying, "But, Dad, I love him so terribly! And he loves me! He could have ridden out of here days ago, if he'd wanted to. Joined his partner, Nick, and been safe in that hideout that the law's never found. Only he stayed to help with the chores till you got back. Don't you see, Dad? He's good and fine and noble and . . ."

Jim reached out for Linda's hand. She didn't know it, of course, but what her dad was planning on doing took a weight and a load off Jim's mind.

If Linda's dad was set on turning Jim over to the law—wasn't it the best thing in the world that could happen to Jim Vance? If he was sent back to prison to serve out the rest of his sentence plus the additional years he'd get for his jail-break, it meant that he was going to get out of having to pay off his blood-debt to Nick. He wasn't welching. He could always tell himself he *would* have repaid Nick, only, he just wasn't going to be able to; that was all.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood-Money Man

JIM forced a smile. "Don't cry, Linda. Your dad's right, and I—" He was going to say, "And I'm happy." But he broke off, because suddenly he wasn't happy. In what had seemed the best solution of everything, something Nick had said occurred to him.

Nick had meant the message for the Dutchman, of course. Only the kid, knowing Nick, had a hunch that Nick would hold George Carnes just as responsible as he'd been going to hold the Dutchman.

"Tell him, if he turns the kid over to the law, if he tries to double-cross me . . . that I'll git him. Even if it takes twenty years!" That was what Nick had said.

Jim felt suddenly cold, thinking of George Carnes' long trip to Chloride City, thinking of the weeks at a time when the girl's father had to leave his daughter alone here at the cabin. What if Nick came back to settle with the Carnes, and found Linda alone here?

Maybe Nick would hold the girl responsible, too. Maybe he'd take out his vengeance on her first. And then wait there, with Linda his prisoner, to dry-gulch her dad when Carnes came back from Chloride City.

Cold sweat broke out on the kid's forehead. Should he tell George Carnes what Nick had said? Warn him that, if he took Jim in to the law, he'd better abandon his shack and put as many miles as he could between himself and Nick Fallon?

Big, broad-shouldered George Carnes with that square, fighting chin of his didn't look like the kind who'd let himself be scared into anything.

The Carnes had gone broke on one ranch, near Alkali Wells. Here in Snake Canyon on the property that they'd bought from the Dutchman, they were just getting a start again. Why should they have to pile their household goods into a wagon and set out across the dry, burning alkalai desert to seek some new homestead, when the kid could prevent it?

And the kid could prevent it. He wanted to go to jail. Where he'd be physically incapable of accompanying Nick on any raids. Where that blood-debt that he owed Nick wouldn't ever have to be paid. Only, the kid saw now that that was too easy a way out. For he had to protect the Carnes.

George Carnes stood there, not expect-

ing any violence from the kid who had taken it all thus far meekly.

Jim Vance made a leap. In a bound, he came in past Carnes' gun. The weapon crashed its slug harmlessly into the ground.

Jim had Carnes' wrist, and was twisting it. The revolver dropped to the earth. And the kid put every ounce of strength he could summon into the haymaker which he lifted from his boot-tops. The man went down like a poled steer.

In the midst of the moment's struggle, the kid hadn't caught the sound of hoof beats coming down into the canyon. He didn't hear the hoof beats now, or catch sight of the figure on the trail. He just stood there, puffing after the exertion which had left him limp. Carnes was out cold. He darted a second's glance at Linda. . . .

Linda didn't understand of course; standing there pale and white and trembling. But the kid had done this, really, to protect her dad.

By midnight, tonight, the kid would be in Nick's hideout. Telling Nick: "I got better, sooner'n you'd figgered. So I jest forked a horse and come on along on my own. The Dutchman said to forget the money you'd promised him. Said he'd been glad to look after me, jest as a favor to you."

Sure, thought the kid. Nick needn't ever know that an ex-lawman named George Carnes had been going to turn the kid over to the law. Nick wouldn't have any reason ever to go back to the cabin and settle with anyone.

The horse and rider had reached the foot of the canyon trail. . . . The rider had spurred into a lope. Looking into Linda's eyes, the kid couldn't have heard an avalanche or a thunder storm or a rifle volley. All that his conscious senses could react to was the girl. She was smiling at him. She understood?

She didn't understand. That he'd knocked her dad down to save him from Nick's vengeance was a concept too complicated to enter her head. He'd knocked her dad down simply because, like any other hunted man, he'd wanted to escape to freedom. But still she was smiling, and coming toward him.

"I was waiting for you to say it, last night, Jim—that you loved me. . . . Only you wouldn't say it, and so I had to say it, this morning, to Dad. . . . And now that I have said it, I'm glad I've said it. Jim, I'm going with you. . . ."

He still didn't hear the rider approaching. He just stood there, staring at her, feeling the landscape tumble and reel and blur round about him.

She wanted to come with him! Poor, misguided, romantic little kid, she loved him so desperately that she was ready to follow him wherever the out-trail led!

He struggled to find his voice . . . and then, all in the same split-second, the whole tenor of the scene swiftly changed. His universe no longer consisted of just himself and Linda. For now, beside the two of them, a man was sitting a horse. Then Nick Fallon was leaping from the saddle!

NICK'S eyes took in the kid, the girl, and the unconscious form of George Carnes. Nick's hand was on his pistol butt.

Nick said, "Heard yesterday, kid, that it wasn't the Dutchman I'd left you with. So I come a-flyin'. . . ." His cold blue eyes wandered again to George Carnes. "And got here jest in time, it looks like. He had the drop on you, huh?"

For the minute, the kid still couldn't find his voice. Nick had seen everything. The kid felt weak, sick. His plan hadn't worked. Unconsciously, he pushed Linda behind him, and then moved on round so that he stood between Nick and Linda's dad. He said quietly,

"You seen it, Nick. All there was to

see. . . . He—he ain't the Dutchman. . . . Let's get a-goin', Nick. Pronto."

Nick didn't move. Or rather Nick's hand did move, to his gun. He wasn't looking at the kid as he said dryly, "Shore, we'll git a-goin'. . . ."

His cold cruel eyes flicked over the kid's shoulder to Linda. Nick said to Linda in the same dry, flat voice. "Clever little minx, huh, sister? When I mistaken you for one of the Dutchman's brats, you didn't tell me no different. You took the kid in anyway; kept him till your dad got home. So's you could turn him over to the law. And then you had it figgered to have the law waitin' here for me when I rode in. You was goin' to trap me, make five thousand dollars. . . ."

The kid lifted his voice. "You got it wrong, Nick!"

Only Nick wasn't listening to what the kid tried to tell him. His angry eyes were narrowing pin-points of fury. Nick was taking it all in just the way the kid had feared he'd take it. Nick had transferred to the Carnes, the same malice he'd have felt if the Dutchman had double-crossed him!

Nick's hand continued to slide on down to his holster. Nick said, "Well, don't say I didn't warn you, that I'd git him, ma'am."

Nick's fingers closed all the way round the butt of his gun, and the gun came up out of its holster. "Take the gal off to one side, kid. We can figger later what's to be done with her. But right now, I'm . . ."

Nick stepped toward George Carnes, who was dazedly batting his eyes, trying to struggle to consciousness.

The kid could have thought of the debt he owed Nick, and balanced it against the debt he owed the girl. He could have wondered what he ought to do. Only the second wasn't long enough. What Jim did, he had to do by instinct. And by instinct he did it. . . .

As Nick took the step past the kid toward the helpless body of George Carnes, the kid stooped like lightning, and had the gun he'd knocked to the ground from George Carnes' hands. Clutching the gun, the kid cried, "Nick!"

Their eyes held each other's for that hair-triggered second. Neither spoke.

Nick's finger tightened on the trigger; and there on the trigger of George Carnes' gun, the kid's finger tightened. . . .

The two revolver shots blended as one.

When the sound of the shots died away, the kid was standing there, clutching a bleeding arm. Nick lay on the ground, very still and not moving. . . .

THEY sat there, the three of them, in George Carnes' rig—Carnes, Linda, and the kid. In the back, covered by a tarpaulin was what was left of Nick Fallon. The miles blurred by. The kid took refuge in pretended exhaustion and was

They padded through the jungle by the hundreds, the little brown men with their sharp bolos. They came after tough Sergeant Shamus Macroom and his little patrol in the Philippine valley. Shamus was like Samson, a good boy at heart who did not wish to cause trouble, but when the dust cleared away, the sight would have done an undertaker's heart good to see. A big novelette by William Chamberlain, "The Jawbone of Shamus Macroom."

The Texas outlaw, Tonto Charlie, returns to lead Young Hardesty, the fighting kid, into a new kind of gun battle in "The Rat's Nest," by Henry Herbert Knibbs.

H. Bedford-Jones writes a fighting western story, "Attack on Adobe Walls."

In "Sunday Soldier" by Perry Adams, the shots fly among the wild tribesmen of the India hill country.

These and other action stories in the world's far flung places appear in *Adventure* for December, on sale November 10th.

Adventure 15c

On Sale November 10th!

silent. Back there when it had all happened, he'd just acted on instinct. But now he had the time to pause and reflect and think. And he *was* thinking.

The rig rolled on. It was dark, and the twinkling street lights were burning when the rig hit Four Corners, and George Carnes pointed the team down Texas Street. Tin-panny music came from the doorways of the saloons, the dance halls, the honkytonks.

Carnes brought the rig to a halt in front of the red brick city hall. A moment later, Linda and her dad and the kid sat in a panelled ante-room facing the town marshal who had succeeded the officer whom Nick had killed two weeks before.

George Carnes told the story from the beginning; the plain, simple truth. Then when he'd finished, he said, "And now, Marshal, I'd like to plead for the kid. He didn't have to scoop up that gun; come to my rescue at the risk of his life. And I was wonderin', do you suppose . . . ?"

George Carnes' voice trailed. The kid heard Linda speak. "You see I love him so terribly. . . ."

Then the marshal spoke. "I reckon we can do somethin', child. . . ." And the marshal went on to tell Linda and her dad what neither of them knew, but what the kid had known for some time—that the governor, by proclamation, had offered a full pardon to anybody who brought Nick in, dead or alive. The marshal said, "So, if the two of you swear on your oaths that it was the kid who killed Nick, why that earns the kid his pardon."

The girl turned and looked at Jim. "Jim, you heard him?"

Jim didn't say anything. All the way in town the kid had been thinking of that morning in the willow brakes, when Nick had come to his rescue; killed his own blood-brother, Red, so as to save the kid's life. . . .

And the more he'd thought about it . . . Oh, he didn't regret having come to George Carnes' rescue. Not a bit of it! He wasn't sorry he'd saved Linda's dad's life! He just regretted having taken Nick's life, and knew that as long as he lived he'd never stop regretting it. He'd been bounden unto Nick, and he'd paid Nick off with a double-cross.

The marshal was telling him he was free. But the kid knew better. . . . He never would be free! As long as he lived, on his heart and his conscience, would be the damning fact that he'd killed the one man in the world to whom he ought to be indebted above everyone else. And while the thought lay there festering in that soul of his that believed in honor and loyalty, how could he ever be a worthy husband to Linda?

It came to the kid that there was only one way, in which, at this point, he could play the rest of the hand out. He'd done something unforgivable. And if that fervent little heart of Linda's was still foolish enough to go on loving him, why. . . .

Pushing Linda away from him, the kid turned to the marshal. He said gruffly, "And that ain't all I get, is it, jest the pardon? I've got the reward comin' to me, too! Five thousand dollars!"

He saw the marshal's jaw drop open. "You mean you want . . . ?"

Linda's face went white, and he heard her cry in horror. "No, Jim! Not the reward. That'd be— I mean, Nick was your friend, until . . . You wouldn't want . . ."

He was stubborn, though. He knew instantly now that he was on the right track. He couldn't just *tell* Linda that he was riding out of her life. Loving him like she did, she wouldn't let him. She'd been ready, there in the cabin yard, to take to the owlhoot trail with him. She'd be just as ready, he saw now, to go with him again. . . .

What was there in it for Linda? Who was ever going to hire the kid, a traitor who'd shot down his leader, so as to win

his pardon? That was all he had to offer her—the life of an outcast.

Jim looked into the girl's white, horror-stricken face. And this was the only way he could do it, to make her stop loving him.

He told her, looking her in the eye: "The law offered ten thousand dollars, Linda. I'm collectin' what's justly mine."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Debt Is Paid

NOON, two days later, found the kid formally released from jail. He came out into the bright sunlight alone. Nobody was waiting to meet him. Folks shied away from him as he walked down the plank sidewalk, and turned into the bank. He shoved the draft for ten thousand dollars, which had accompanied his pardon, across the teller's window, and took his blood-money in cash. Only, strangely, it didn't make him feel sick to handle the reward money. . . .

He'd been sick, last night, thinking how he'd paid off Nick. But he smiled now as he took the ten thousand dollars in cash into the office of the bank's president.

Three thousand, six hundred and seventy three dollars! The Carnes' wouldn't suspect an odd sum like that, the kid thought. Jim handed the bank president the crisp new notes. Now the Carnes family weren't going to be poor any longer!

Grinning, the kid conspired with the bank president.

"If they got it tomorrow, they might suspect what it was. But maybe a couple of months from now, the sum bein' an odd sum and everything. . . . Tell 'em it came from the East; from some rich relative they never heard of, that jest died."

The bank president grinned back at Jim. "Sure, kid. They won't ever know it was the blood money. . . ."

The bank president held out his hand, and Jim took it, and then walked on down Main Street, and turned into the Silver Dollar with its wheels and its faro tables and continuous poker game.

At two in the morning, desperately, though the kid had tried to lose the rest of the five thousand dollars that he hadn't thought it safe or prudent to give to the Carnes, he hadn't been able to. He still had about the same amount as when he'd entered the place. Maybe a little bit more.

Not that it mattered, he guessed. All evening long, three men with hard, granite faces like Nick's had hovered near him watching him play. And now that the Silver Dollar was closing, and he was walking out into the blackness of the night, he knew that the three men with the hard granite faces were going to follow him. Going to overtake him, and— Attack him? Kill him for the blood-money, with the law not caring particularly what happened to one renegade who'd killed another for no better reason than to be five thousand dollars richer?

It was pitch black outside. The street lamps had gone off at midnight. The kid walked on down the plank sidewalk, shoulders thrown out, not deigning to look behind him as he heard the following footsteps. Because there was pain in his heart tonight and that ache wasn't entirely remorse that he'd had to repay Nick's tender care of him in gunsmoke.

Part of the pain was Linda. The kid had the memory of a white, stricken face; of horror in two brown eyes that once had overflowed with love. And somehow the kid didn't care any more, tonight, what was going to happen to one renegade who'd killed another.

He kept on walking. Why didn't they shoot? Why didn't they have it over with? What had he to live for any longer?

And then it happened, at last there in the middle of the next block. . . . The following footsteps had almost closed in on the kid, when there came the sound

of a shot! Only the shot wasn't directed at him. The three renegades were running. . . . Simultaneously, whoever had fired the shot was sitting his horse there at the curb. There in the moonlight, Jim was staring into the face of—his dad!

While he stood there, blinking in astonishment at his father, other ponies roared up. First behind Jim's dad was Linda. And then Mr. Carnes. And then the town marshal. And then the bank president who'd promised Jim that he'd give the Carnes the three thousand six hundred and seventy-three dollars.

And there for a minute, everybody made such a din that Jim couldn't understand anybody. But he understood this much: Linda had fought through to him, and had thrown her arms round his neck and was clinging to him and sobbing. And the bank president was grinning, saying, "I double-crossed you, I'm afraid, Jim. When you told me what you wanted done with the reward, I figgered Linda had a right to the truth. So I rode out to Snake Canyon. . . ."

Jim's father spoke up—the man Jim hadn't seen since he'd run away from home: "And Billings from the bank got there at the cabin the same time I did. So, when he'd told his story, and Linda'd found out what you really intended doin' with the blood money, we all loped in together to find you. Picked up the marshal, down the street, and. . . ."

THEN Mr. Vance told the rest of it. After Jim had run away from home, Jim's dad had had posters printed with the kid's picture on them. Only for a long, long time the dodgers hadn't turned up any trace of Jim. Nobody had written in from anywhere to claim the thousand dollars reward which Jim's father had offered for news of his missing son—until three months ago. . . .

Then Mr. Vance had received a letter from Nick Fallon! Nick had informed him that he'd recognized his son in prison from the poster. He went on to say that he'd taken it, then, upon himself to act as Jim's guardian.

Knowing that the owner of the vast cattle kingdom was wealthy, Nick had persuaded the kid to escape from jail with him; had taken him to the hideout.

"The gist of Nick's game," said the elder Vance, "bein' this. He wasn't interested in the thousand dollars I'd offered for news of you, Jim. He calmly, coldbloodedly asked me for *fifty* thousand. And there I was, kid. He was holdin' you prisoner for fifty thousand dollars ransom, and what could I do, but accept his terms? I didn't dare go to the law. Even if the law could have taken you from Nick, unharmed, you was a fugitive that the law itself would then have sent back to prison!"

The kid stood there, suddenly tingling. Nick had helped him to escape from jail only because Nick knew that his dad was a wealthy cattle baron! Those three months at the hideout, Nick had been holding him for fifty-thousand dollars ransom?

Mr. Vance continued: "After considerable correspondence, Nick and I finally come to terms. We agreed on a meetin' place. It was arranged, about two weeks ago, that Nick was to bring you to Chloride City and I'd pay him the ransom there. You know what happened. You and Nick and Red never got there. Nick had his brush with the law here, and . . ."

Only for the minute the kid wasn't listening to the rest of what his dad was saying. He'd heard all that he needed to hear to know that he was free of his blood-debt to Nick! There'd never been such a blood-debt!

Nick hadn't saved the kid's life out of mercy, that day. He'd saved it out of greed! The two Fallons had set out to turn Jim Vance over to his dad and collect fifty thousand dollars. The brush with the law had prevented their keeping their ap-

pointment with the elder Vance. Jim's wound had introduced other difficulties.

Red, getting panicky, had been in favor of abandoning the whole scheme of trying to collect the ransom. While Nick, stubbornly and greedily, had refused to abandon the scheme, even if it meant additional risk. Even if it meant he had to kill his own brother!

Light-hearted dizziness filled the kid. He heard his father's voice still going on. Something about trying to find his way, alone to Nick's hideout, after the appointment in Chloride City hadn't been kept. Something about stopping at the Carnes' cabin, tonight to ask his way. Yes, and he heard his dad mention Lou's name, too. "I needed you so terribly, boy, after Lou left me. . . ."

Lou had left? He could listen to that story later. For the moment the kid wasn't interested in it. For the moment all he cared about was the sense of freedom that filled him.

What had he wanted all his life to be sure of? That he'd played his cards as a Texas gentleman would play them? He *could* be sure of that, now! There remained only the reward to be turned back to the county.

And then he was free!

He took his father's hand. His voice choked a little. "I'm sorry about Lou, Dad. I'm so happy, it don't seem right for you. . . ."

And then he saw his dad grin at him, at Linda. "Who said I wasn't happy, boy?"

THE END

Send for this Genuine Sterling Silver Western Ring Today!

(It will make an ideal Christmas gift for girl or man!)

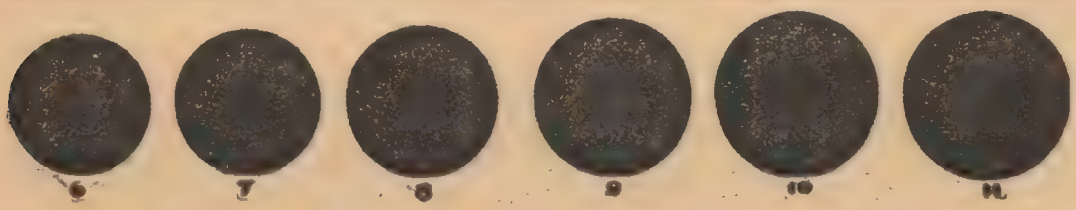
Join the legion of *Dime Western Magazine* readers who are already wearing this genuine sterling silver ring! Here is a chance for all lovers of the Old West who thrill to its high drama, who take pride in its great heritage of fair play, courage and loyalty, to wear this handsome symbol of the romantic cattle empire! The ring pictured is of permanent value and lasting beauty; it is only because of the vast number of readers of this magazine requesting some fitting memento of the old longhorn days that we were able to make purchases in quantity sufficient to pass on to you the real saving it represents. You can buy this ring for the amazingly low price of *fifty cents*, only through the publishers of this magazine. We take pride in offering this worth-while ornament to everyone who would like to wear and keep this symbol of the untamed frontier. Just send fifty cents (50c) in money-order, stamps or coin, fill out the coupon with your name, address and ring size, and your ring will be mailed, post-paid, the same day your order is received!

Editor of DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE,
205 East 42nd Street, New York City.

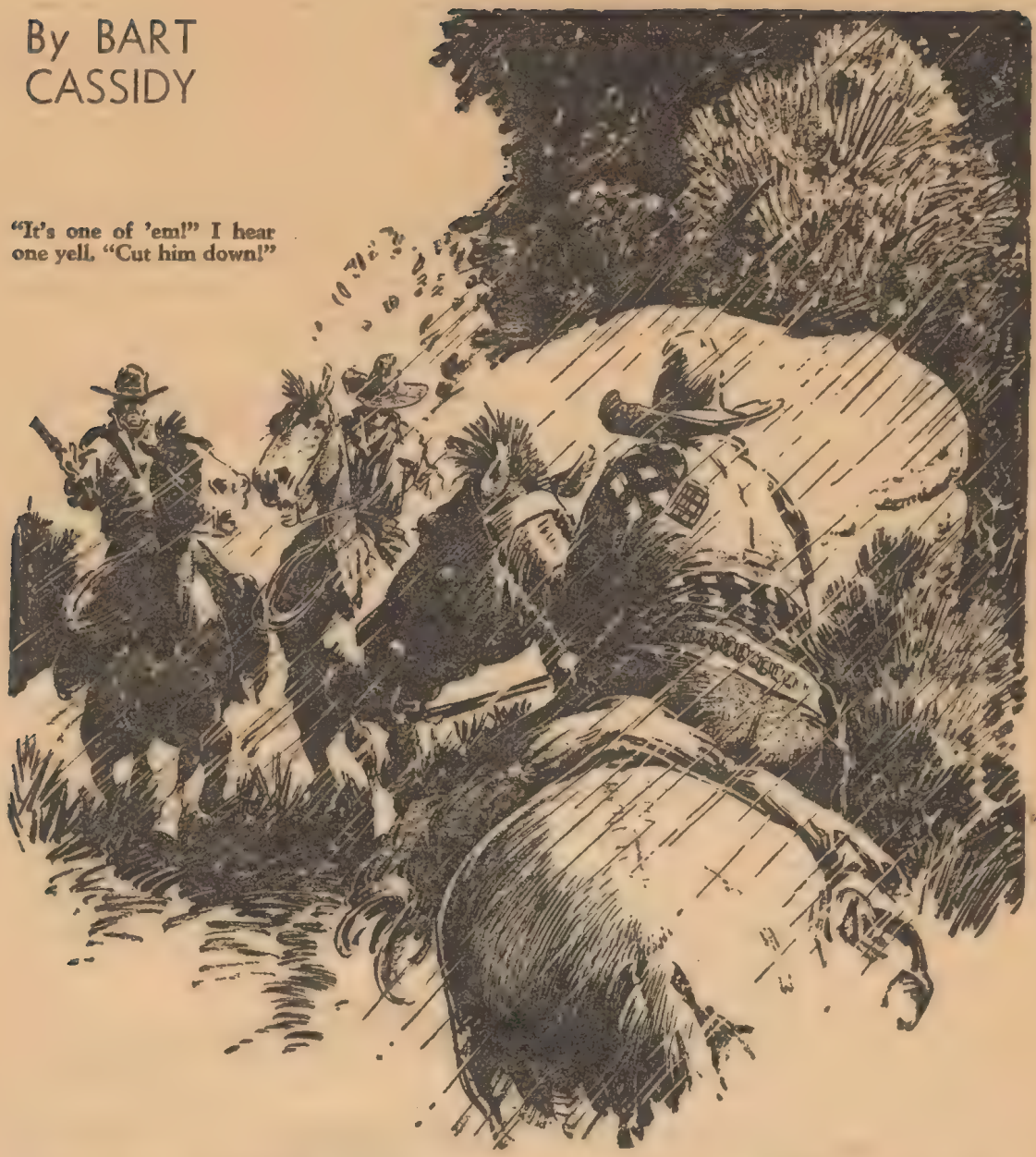
I would like to own the sterling silver "Longhorn" ring, illustrated above, for which I enclose fifty cents (50c) in coin or stamps.....
(Signature)

My ring size is .....
(Street and number)

....
(City and State)



By BART CASSIDY



"It's one of 'em!" I hear one yell. "Cut him down!"

Boots and Saddles for Tensleep!

A saddle-galled USA-branded pony led Tensleep straight toward death. . . . For he must ride back to the troopers who hunted him, so that half a hundred beleaguered ranchers might have another chance to live!

RIDE a white hawss an' draw down the lightnin'! That's an old sayin' amongst the frisky gents who have seen the elephant an' heard the hoot of the owl. An' I should have remembered it when I laid my eyes on that white beauty lazin' under an ironwood tree, at the east toe of the Huachuca Mountains. This 'un takes my eye because he is marked with Uncle Sam's U.S.A. brand. An' because his back's a sight of saddle galls.

To understand my feelin's, you gotta know that troopers don't fork white hawsses. It's allus officers. Furthermore, no hawssbacker who's worth his salt rubs holes in his pony's back. It's a sure sign

of a gent too lazy to straighten out his blanket an' too cussed careless of hawss-flesh to keep the sweat washed out from under his saddle. In this case it's likely some shavetail lieutenant from West Point, an' for my money there ain't no breed that knows more about nothin' an' less about somethin'.

Lookin' this bronc over, my mad goes up like summer mercury an' my caution comes down like Old Glory at sundown. A gent that don't think no more of his saddler than this feller does, deserves to be set afoot. An' anyway, how do I know that Fort Huachuca lies just over a low ridge? Or that some trooper is watchin' me from someplace?

The white pony wakes up an' nickers. Glory hawss answers him an' closes in. Soon them two are bitin' each other's neck, affectionate an' I'm beginnin' to get ideas in my head. Usin' a little care, that U S A will make a nice Y 8 W Dart. An' the nice white pony will find a rider who'll fork him humane an' give him a little care. It's a nice theory, but it don't work out thataway. Which, mebbe because I'm Tensleep Maxon, hawss-lovin' stepson of misfortune, I find is the trouble with so many of my careful plans.

I ain't gone three miles with my find when dust is liftin' behind me an' here comes a troop of army riders playin' hell with their spurs. I stir Whitey into a gallop, but he ain't feelin' none too good an', before long, he's limpin'. Them troopers are gainin' fast an', much as I hate to do it, I'm forced to cut the white brute loose.

I'm givin' Glory his head, twistin' in the saddle, hopin' to see them army men pick up their lost bronc an' turn back. Which they don't do nothin' of the kind. They buzz on past him without givin' him a look. An' it's plain they're achin' to make me sweat for my kindness of heart!

I touch Glory with the spurs an' commence to draw away. Then they're shootin' at me. Shootin' from the deck of a lungin' pony ain't calculated to produce the best results, but lead is singin' altogether too close for comfort as I swerve into the hills an' hide myself between the ridges.

I've got the fastest horse, but that's balanced by the fact that I don't know the country like they do. We play hide-an'-go-seek in the canyons an' through the brush until midafternoon. Then, by usin' all the tricks I know, I throw 'em off my trail. I'm headin' down a long mountain valley, breathin' Glory hawss an' pattin' myself on the back, when a lookin' glass starts winkin' from a high peak. I thumb my nose at it, then I'm rollin' my spurs again as the troop whirls in behind me. The stubborn sons.

They run me out into the open again an' I've got all my trickery to go through again. They're playin' me like a coyote pack plays a rabbit. Actin' like they don't care if it takes 'em a month to run me down. An' why should they? They ain't got nothin' else to do for excitement, an' to earn their dollar a day.

They cut me off from the friendly canyons an' ridges, but I've got a half mile start on 'em an' I decide to lengthen it. Way off across the valley, the Pinto Mountains lift their jagged peaks. If I can make that cover, what with night due to fall before I reach it, I'll really give 'em something to follow.

THEY waste a lot of Uncle Sam's ammunition, an' Glory don't like the song of them bullets no better than I do. The half mile becomes three quarters. Then a mile. An', in order to spell my pony, I slow the pace an' try to hold that lead. I'm hopin' as I split the breeze that they'll get discouraged an' turn back. But they're mule-eared an' hang to the trail. The sun finally sinks behind the Huachucas. An' then, as is the way on southern ranges, it's dusk an' then night.

Darkness comes in a matter of minutes.

Against the last faint line of light along the western skyline, I see the troop pull up an' dismount, where there's good grass an' a little creek flowin' across the flats. I rein Glory down to a slow canter an' continue on to'rds the Pintos. I don't know where I'm goin' an' I don't care much. So, intersectin' a well traveled wagon road, I foller it to'rds the hills. As the way pitches up, Glory slows to a walk an' I hook one knee about the horn an' roll a cigareet. Then we're moving up a wide canyon.

The way gets steeper an' the night darker as clouds gloom the stars. Up in the peaks thunder is rumblin' an' I button up my coat against the nasty little wind swirlin' down the canyon. An' then that wind fetches down a sound that stirs goose pimples along my spine.

At first I think it's coyotes hollerin', but I ease along, careful, finally roundin' a bend in the draw. An' then I see it.

A big fire is blazin', squarely in the road. Against the glow I can make out horses. An' beyond, a lot of men are millin' around a body hangin' from the outstretched limb of an oak tree. Even as I watch, someone bellers an order an' they all lift their six-shooters an' start blastin' lead into the still livin' body, caperin' an' yellin' like demons. Holy cow! I find myself feelin' plumb sorry for the victim. But, knowin' he's past carin', an' that this sorta weakness got me into more'n half my troubles, I cut up over the ridge, cross back into the canyon road farther up an' continue up to'rds the ridge. Cripes, some of that bunch looked like Injuns!

Now an' then a drop of rain touches my face coldly. It's a nasty night to be out, an' hopin' I'll find a town on the other side of the hills I put the spurs to Glory's briskit.

We wheel up into the jaws of a narrow pass. An', as the ground levels off, we speed the pace. We're squarely at the ridge when suddenly Glory hawss is rearin' an' swervin'. An' there, right before us, is a stout barb wire fence blockin' the road.

I'm swingin' down to look for the gate when a voice stabs out of the darkness. "Save us the trouble of shootin' you out of yore leather, amigo. Now shove up them gun-snatchers or we'll blow you to rags!"

My heart jumps right out onto my tongue. "Take it easy, neighbor!" I yelp, shovin' my hands high. "I'm only a peaceful pilgrim tryin' to get through the pass."

"Pull his stinger, Enoch," calls a voice from higher up, "then fetch him up here."

A ungentle jasper snatches my cutter, snarls "Foller the fence," an' shoves me before him. After a climb of about fifty feet, I top out on the ridge. An' there sets a little one-room rock hut, with faint light streamin' from the low entrance. Shadows move about me. An' in the sky flare of a distance lightning flash, I get a momentary glimpse of stern, bearded men watchin' me with hateful eyes.

"Go on in," invites a deep voiced gent, in a way that leaves no room for augerment. I stoop to enter, findin' myself in a bee-hive of activity. A half dozen men are hunkered on the ground, loadin' shells.

An oldtimer with a round face rimmed with a beard lifts watery eyes to me, motions me to my hunkers.

"Where you goin'?" he asks.

"You've got me, friend," I tell him. "From the things I'm seein' in these parts I've wondered if mebby I wasn't goin' crazy. What have I busted into?"

His lips twist. "If you just gotta get funny, we'll let you crack yore jokes lookin' down the barrel of a gun. I asked you where yo're goin' to."

A GROWL runs around the circle an' through them gathered outside to listen. As near as I can tell, there's around

a dozen men, all farmers from the look of 'em. An' from the guns they're packin' they're plainly in no mood to be hoorawed.

"I can't answer that, gents," I tell 'em, serious, " 'cause I don't know myself. To make it plain, you might say I'm a saddle bum. An' where I go don't matter to me or—"

"Where'd you come from, just now?" he cuts in.

"From over near Fort Huachuca."

His pale eyes snap. "An' I suppose you didn't have no business with Carter Bastrop on yore way up the canyon?"

"Never heard of the gent. Fact is, I ain't had no business with anybody."

Silence for a moment, an' I can see 'em lookin' at one another, questioningly. A big, burly gent with wild hair is the first to speak. "You mean," he says, "that you come up the canyon without bein' stopped? You never seen nobody between here an' the valley?"

I explain to 'em, careful, what I run into down in the canyon, tellin' 'em about the fire, the body hangin' from the oak an' the hang-crew caperin' about the rope —some of 'em with long black hair held back with narrow headbands, like Injuns. It seems to drain the blood from their faces.

"Bastrop!" grunts one, between locked teeth. "Bastrop an' his renegade Apaches!"

"Poor Mark!" mourns another. "An' his little woman waitin' for him back in their shack!"

"Somebody you know?" I ask.

"One of us," says the old patriarch, stiff. "When we seen 'em headin' thisaway at dusk, he volunteered to go for the soldiers. They caught an' killed him, the devils. I—I never should have let him go."

"Looks to me," rasps another, "that this feller's one of Bastrop's men. Sendin' 'em in one at a time so's to put rifles behind us. We ain't got a chance, Jeremiah, but we can hang such as we ketch, leavin' 'em for Bastrop to find when he pushes in past us!"

A mutter of approval shakes 'em. I can feel the cold breath of death blowin' onto me. Cripes!

"Hold on, boys," I protest. "I'm tellin' you the truth. I never heard of this Bastrop gent, don't know nobody in all this scope of country, an' haven't the faintest idea as to what this trouble's about. Like I said, I just come down from Montana."

"What's yore name?" demands the patriarch, an' I can see he's unaffected by the panic of the younger men.

"Maxon," I tell him, too scairt to lie. "They call me Tensleep."

"Let me look at that jigger," says a voice outside, an' a tall, slat-built man crowds into the shack, peerin' into my face. "Hell, yes!" he says, a queer little grin twistin' his wide mouth. "I remember you. I was on the jury in Chinook, five-six year ago, when you was tried for killin' that Hat puncher. You mind how Ol' Judge Harmony Hawks adjourned court to the barroom?" he asks, grinnin' savage. "An' how you an' him cut cards to see if you'd swing or get ten years in stony lonesome? Funniest thing ever I saw." He turns to his pardners. "I know this feller an' I'm bettin' my shirt he's all right. A hawss thief mebby, but no part of the stripe that follers Carter Bastrop. Fact is, I'll betcha he'll throw his gun in alongside ours, won't yuh, Tensleep?"

"From the looks of things," I tell him, cautious, "only a fool would do that. An' even if I'm that kind of a fool, looks like I orta know something of the lay. What goes on here?"

EVERYBODY looks to the patriarch an' he starts talkin' bitter. "You're right, stranger. Only a fool would throw in with us. For the lightning is about

to strike us an' all hell's due to bust loose. . . ."

As if in answer to his prediction, a lightnin' bolt hisses groundward; fire plays before our eyes an' the crash an' roar of thunder deafens us. The rain comes down in sheets an' the men crowd in to escape it.

The ol' timer has to raise his voice: "About twenty families of us taken up claims in the Sentinel Valley, Maxon, an' thereby shook a red flag in the face of the big he-bull of these ranges, Carter Bastrop, boss of the C Bar B. . . ."

"It's an old story that never changes much," I tell him.

"Bastrop warned us away, time an' again," he continued. "But we're all Missourians, an' we've gotta be showed by map the things that strike at our welfare. Failin' to stampede us like he has other settlers, he sends in assassins to wipe us out. Got a few of us, they did, but nary a one of them killers ever got back to collect Bastrop's blood-money. So now Bastrop's on his way in to feed us wholesale lead. We're ready for him, outnumbered though we be. He's got two ways in—this pass an' the one across the valley. We're guardin' both doors. If he tries both ways at once, all we can do is fight. If he storms one pass, the boys guardin' it light a signal fire an' warn the boys across the valley to go down an' take the wimmen an' kids out, just in case."

"But what about this hanged feller you call Mark?" I ask him. "You said he was on his way to the soldiers."

"When we seen how many they was," confesses the patriarch, "we got spooky. I reckon it was because we seen he had renegade Apaches with him. They'll find a way over the ridge an' go around us; that's what we fear. A half dozen of 'em inside our cliffs could kill every woman an' child in the valley before big daylight. It's government business gettin' them back onto the reservation; that's why we sent poor Mark for the soldiers. Now that he's dead, they'll be lettin' us hear from them. Hey, boys, no sign yet from across the valley?"

"No sign, Jeremiah," comes the growled answer from one of the crouched men in the doorway.

"That means they're makin' their try from this side," he says, "an' they'll soon be strikin'. Time to start that signal fire."

They grunt, an' I can hear their boots sloggin' on the rain-sluiced ground. Silence falls inside the shack, broke only by the dripping of water through the roof, an' the labored breathin' of worried men.

DEEP down inside me is a nervous gnawin', as I think of them wimmen an' kids down in the valley. Huddlin' together beside their hearth fires, listenin' for the return of their men folks—or for somethin' much worse. Common sense tells me to make some excuses, fork Glory hawss an' ride. Yet even as I have the thought, I put it away.

Butch, the Kid, Hank Carver an' the Tall Texan were my friends, an' all had these same kind of fights . . . an' lost 'em. Ever afterwards, they was dedicated to fightin' the Carter Bastrops of this world an', wherever they are now, their guns is tied down an' ready for that sort. Just as mine is.

The patriarch's eyes is on the ground an' he looks to me like one who's come back from the grave to lead his people. The rest just hunker there, their eyes fixed on him with sort of a dogged reverence an' a promise to follow him to hell an' back. Funny, my heart is poundin' in my chest an' I'm feelin' the same way.

Outside is them bootsteps splashin' again. All eyes go to the doorway, where three faces give back the smoky light of the lantern. Faces so pale as to prepare us for the bad news.

"Can't make it, Jeremiah," croaks one. "The kindlin' pile's wringin' wet an' the

rain's fallin' too hard to hope to make a fire. Only hope's the oil in that lantern, an' . . ."

His voice cuts off an' his eyes an' those of all the rest are on the lantern. It's gutterin', makin' little poppin' noises foretellin' the emptyin' of the bowl. Fear fills that cabin, holdin' back the breath of those desperate men. But Ol' Jeremiah don't change no more than if he was a ghost. His head tips up an' down an' he presses the tips of his gnarled fingers together like a man about to pray.

"It's God's will, boys," he says, patient an' resigned. "Reckon all's left to us now is to scatter along the ridge an' keep our powder dry. They're likely slinkin' up the mountain now, figgerin' to cross the ridge under cover of a fake attack by Bastrop's gunmen. . . ."

A SHARP sound breaks into his words, like one of the men in the doorway slappin' another on the back. One of 'em moans, weak, claps his hands to his breast an' falls full length into the shack. An' through the whine of the wind an' the splashin' of the rain comes the faint, sharp crack of a rifle.

"Bastrop!" The patriarch grits out the word an' smashes the failin' lantern with a swipe of his boot. "Down low an' get to yore posts." He returns my gun.

Everybody drops, me included, 'cause lead is wingin' through the rain an' wailin' off the rock walls of the shack. I can hear the slither of the men as they crawl outside. An' I'm following, unable at the moment to think of anything but Glory, rein-tied down by the wire, in the neck of the pass.

I crawl over the dead man, duck out into the storm. The wind ketches my breath an' it's so dark a man can't take a step without bein' sure he's about to pitch off into space. Down to my right, I can see the flash an' flare of muzzle-bursts an' I'm fittin' my pistol grip to my palm, figgerin' to drop some of them gun-handy renegades when the patriarch's voice comes from behind me.

"No shooting, Maxon, until the boys find their posts. All you'll do is to draw their fire."

Cripes! He can see like a cat in the dark. It's good advice an' I take it. I can hear the men scramblin' to the places assigned them, but I can't see a thing. On all fours, I start crawlin' ahead, feelin' for the drop-off. I find it an' start lettin' myself over when that voice comes from behind me again, patient yet filled with warning. It says:

"Where you going, Maxon?"

"After my hawss," I tell him. "I'd rather eat lead myself than to have that pony hit."

"Yore horse," he says, "is tied with the others, in the little rocky cup beyond the cabin. Better get down an' lie low until they show their hands."

"Which is just what they want us to do," I auger, "if they're sendin' them Injuns across the ridge."

Silence for a moment, until I think he's moved away from me. Then: "That's true, Maxon. But what is there we can do about it? The men are looking to me for guidance but it looks like too big a job. I'm of a mind to lead them back into the valley, each man to defend his own home. But, God helping us, there are two homes without men now. What can we do?"

"We've got two outs better'n that," I tell him. "One is to play Injuns ourselves, coyote down the slope an' pick them devils off, one by one."

"Too risky," he counters. "All we'll get is Bastrop's gunmen, posted there to hold us. The Apache killers will pass us an' go on into the valley."

"The other," I tell him, unenthusiastic, "is to send a rider through 'em, to get the soldiers."

"Too far," he comes back. "It's a long

ways to Fort Huachuca. Before a man got back with the troopers, the fight here might be lost. Besides, I doubt a man could get through. Poor Mark couldn't. An' now the ground is so slick an' the night is so black it would be suicide trying to get speed out of a horse. No, if I sent one of them fine boys down that canyon, I'd have it everlastin'ly on my conscience."

"Would you feel the same," I ask him, "if you knowed the troopers was within five miles of here, this minute?"

"What?" he barks, an' then we're both huggin' the ground as a flock of lead is whizzin' to the sound of his voice. Firin' breaks out along the ridge, an' I can hear the *clang* of wire in the pass, like somebody is tryin' to cut the fence. I shake out three fast shots, hear somebody yell down yonder. Then, for a matter of minutes, all hell busts loose, with every gun speakin'.

Lightnin' reaches down with a roarin', crashin' an' fryin' that turns the earth white an' fills a man's nostrils with brimstone. But, like always, quiet comes at last, with both sides waitin'. Not until then do I hear from Jeremiah.

"What's that you said about the soldiers?" he asks, soft. "How do you know?"

I tell him about my sin, of the chase an' of seein' the troop light down like mebby they was goin' into camp. An' even as I'm tellin' it, I realize how foolish it is to even hope they're still there in this rain. I'm wet to the skin, shiverin' in the chill of it. Shore don't look like soldiers would hang around in the rain, just on account of one poor saddle-galled white hawss, which they've already recovered.

But my yarn seems to be the spark to light Jeremiah's hope. "It looks like the only chance we've got," he mutters, miserable. I'll slip along the line, lettin' the boys draw straws until one is the loser. But I doubt there's a horse amongst us that can keep its feet on a run down that canyon. Now tell me, Maxon, just where those troopers can be found."

"Time I tell you," I growl, "an' time you make the rounds drawin' straws, I can be down there an' back—on a hawss I'll bet can make it, if there's a pony in the country that can." Seems to me then that I ain't doin' the talkin'. Yet it's my voice I hear addin': "Have my Glory hawss fetched here an' I'll make the try."

"Bless you, Maxon!" His hands are on mine in that wet blackness, pressin' fervent. "Our prayers will be goin' up for yore success. Wait here."

HE'S gone in a great gust of slantin' rain, an' I'm cussin' myself for my fool soft-heartedness. Looks like every time I open my mouth lately, I put my foot into it. An' right now I've jammed in my whole leg, plumb to the hip.

Tremblin' a little, I jack out the empties an' reload my gun. Lookin' forward, I'm scairt stiff. Ahead of me stretches a slick trail; killers barrin' the way, mebby findin' the soldiers gone an' havin' to ride plumb back to the fort. Cripes! With every chance they will recognize me as the gent who tried to steal the white pony. An' I know that there's nobody less forgivin' than an army man.

If them thoughts tend to booger my spirit, other thoughts intrude to sustain me. These farmers, sellin' their lives dear, that their wimmen an' kids may live, even if they can't hang onto their rights. The soggy pile of twigs an' brush that was meant to warn their mates across the valley—the signal fire that can't be lit. Helpless folks down below, trustin' an' prayin' that victory will be on the side of their men. Yeah, there's plenty to make me want to risk Glory an' my own neck by undertakin' this hope-gone ride. Plenty.

A low splash of hoofs, a grunt. Then I'm standin' beside Glory an' the patriarch's hand is on my shoulder. "I wouldn't let you go, Maxon," he mur-

murs, "except that I believe God sent you to us to save us. May He see you through an' back to us!"

"Thanks," I tell him, an' my teeth are chatterin' with chill an' excitement. "I'll see you when the Springfields commence to sing."

Our hands touch an' I'm in the saddle. My spurs roll an' Glory hits the slant leadin' down into the slot of the pass. Rocks roll an' I utter a silent prayer that my pony knows where he's goin'. Guns start blarin' an' lead wails off the rocks behind me. The farmers open up an' it sounds like a full-fledged war, with the thunder tryin' to drown it out.

Glory hits the road, stumbles. I jerk him up an' he gathers speed as he whirls down the gap. My gun is in my hand now an' my eyes are strainin' into the pit blackness. I'm thankful for all the blastin', same drownin' out the hoofbeats. Ahead of me a muzzle-flame winks an' I smash lead at it, the buckin' of the gun a tonic for my strained nerves. In my right mind, I wouldn't have pulled that stunt on a bet.

The flash of my gun draws their attention. A wave of angry roars hits down the draw an' another wave of lead sings up, breakin' against the hillsides an' screamin' away into the night. Wheelin' about a turn, Glory skids, goes to his knees, scramblin' up before he piles me. I'm satisfied that saves my life, an' mebbyso his. Then he's poundin' mud at a hard gallop, holdin' his feet in some way I can't understand. An' finally lungin' into the roarin' little crick thet ain't little no more.

Men are still hollerin', mostly behind me, an' I'm gainin' hope that I've run the blockade when the shadows of two horsemen are before me. They're puttin' their broncs into the stream to head me off.

"It's one of 'em!" I hear one yell. "Cut him down."

His pistol flashes an' I'm goin' over the withers. Then I'm squeezin' my own trigger. A faint cry, a splash, an' Glory's shoulderin' a riderless horse out of the way. Curses come from the other rider, an' Glory rears an' screams as he's bullet-hit.

Rage pours through me. I twist in the saddle to fire at the flash. In the muzzle flare I see a bearded, contorted face of the second rider as he clutches for the horn. He's hit an' I'm spurrin' Glory, holdin' my breath for the tremor that will signal his failin'.

IF Glory's carryin' lead, he don't show it. His stride is long an' steady, his breath even. An' I sigh with relief. Just creased, I decide. Glory seems to like the crick, where the footin' is rough but not lard-slick like the road. An' I give him his head. The water rises hock deep; then to the stirrups. It's swift an' treacherous an' Glory soon gets enough. He takes to the road, an' after that it's hell-in-the-saddle. Glory reels like he's drunk. Twice he goes down, spillin' me into the mud. Time lost, but no harm done. Then we hit the valley floor.

It ain't really very long, though it seems hours, before I spot the fire ahead. An' the little dog tents of the troopers. A challenge: "Who goes there?" A coated sentry is silhouetted against the fire.

"Friend!" I holler.

"Friend advance and alight." A rifle glitters at ready.

I rear Glory an' light down. There's a stir among the tents an' an officer comes a-runnin'. The rain is light out here an' someone throws wood on the fire. A young shavetail rushes up, turnin' a bulls-eye lantern into my face.

"Jumping Jehovah!" he yelps. "It's our horsethief. Captain, will you look what the storm blew in."

He swaggers like he's just caught some desperate outlaw single-handed. The captain comes up, pullin' on his service coat

an' peerin' at me an' Glory, searchin'.

"Looks like the horse," he allows. "But as to the man," he grins, rueful, "I wouldn't be able to say. We never got close enough."

"I know," hollers the shavetail. "I was watchin' him when he stole my horse. I'd know him anywhere."

"Is that right?" the captain asks me. "Are you the man who stole the white horse, the man we chased all afternoon?"

"If the lieutenant says so, it must be true, Captain," I say, sarcastic. "I never knowed one of the critters in my life that didn't know everything."

"What's your name?" asks the captain, his eyes sparklin'.

"Maxon," I give him, honest. "Tensleep Maxon."

"Maxon," he echoes, an' a faraway look comes into his eyes. "No kin, by any chance, to Hiram Maxon—scout with Custer's 7th Cavalry?"

"Yes sir," I say, humble. "Hiram Maxon was my father."

His face softens an' his hand comes out. "I'm proud to know you, Maxon," he says, fervent. "I'm Captain James Eberhard, once of General Crook's 3rd Cavalry. I knew your father well, joined in mourning him as one of the hero dead of our campaign against the Cheyenne and the Sioux." He whirls on the shavetail, savage. "It looks like you've gone off half cocked again, Lieutenant. I demand you apologize to the son of one of our foremost scouts. . . ."

"Which there ain't time for that, Captain," I put in, seein' how plumb crestfallen the shavetail is. "Fact is, I'm here to beg your help. I was on my way to Huachuca when I saw your fire. It's like this: A bunch of us farmers . . ."

I spin the whole story, tellin' it plumb scary an' includin' myself amongst the followers of Ol' Jeremiah. When I speak the name Carter Bastrop, I see the captain's eyes widen. And when I mention the renegade Injuns caperin' about the body of Mark, the courier, his face turns to granite an' he's snappin' orders. Boots an' Saddles rings through the night, an' in a matter of minutes we're racin' to'rds the pass, me, the captain an' the shavetail in the lead.

AS WE hit the toe of the mountain, the distant flutter of gunfire is plainly audible. It's like wine to the troopers. An' even the cavalry hawsses prick their ears forward an' set a pace that wore-out Glory hawss is hard pressed to match.

There's high water in the canyon, but neither that nor the slick road slows us. Several troopers spill an' Glory really dumps me in the mud as we're nearin' the top. But nobody waits for nobody. The captain an' me—we've talked out the plan of battle an' the word has been passed to the troopers. It's just every man for himself, once we hit the pass. . . . An' shoot to kill!

It's just breakin' day an' a great yell goes up as we come streamin' up into Bastrop's rear guard—a yell cut off in the crash of Springfields as the troopers go into action. Down go half a dozen renegades an' then we're splittin', the captain takin' half up one side, me an' the shavetail leadin' a howlin', ranicky crew up the other. These peacetime soldiers is hungry for a lot of things, of which war leads the list. An' war they're gettin', as we drive them forted Bastrop men out of their coverts. They are on the fight, shootin' as they run. It's warm work—but excitin'.

The lieutenant has sheathed his carbine an' is poppin' slugs with his service Colt. He's a couple jumps ahead of me an' has

Tensleep, loveable fugitive, rides each month in *Dime Western!* Don't forget the all-star, extra-value Anniversary Issue—on sale everywhere Dec. 1st!

just downed a runnin' gun-slammer when I see a man rear up in the brush an' throw a rifle level—beadin' at the shavetail. I try to blot the picture of the white pony's sore back from my mind as I blast that renegade down.

"The big auger's down! Bastrop's killed!" someone yells wildly.

It throws 'em into a panic an' they make a rush over the hill. As they top out on the ridge, the bullets of the valley men cut 'em down. The few survivors cave, liftin' their hands an' squallin' for mercy.

It's all over, an' the sun is comin' up to cheer men's spirits an' dry out their clothes. The patriarch an' all his men come out of their holes an' cluster about the captain. The round-up ain't netted many Apaches, but one of the prisoners admits there was about twenty, some of 'em already having slipped through into the valley. So there ain't no delay. The captain orders his men to follow him in, with the patriarch guidin' 'em on the hunt an' leadin' 'em to a hot breakfast below.

They all beg me to ride with 'em, but I've got a stummick full of war an' my spurs is itchin' for more peaceful pastures. I decline, graceful, admittin' to business that won't wait. One by one, the farmers file up, thankin' me for somethin' they can't find words to express. What I read in their eyes is thanks enough. The shavetail, still white from his close shave at the muzzle of Carter Bastrop's gun, rides up an' thanks me for my quick shooting an' apologizes for mistakin' me for a hawss thief.

The captain don't come near me, but his voice is ringin' as he orders his troop into line. The color sergeant has unholstered the flag, sabers are drawn an' held at present; the captain an' the shavetail salute smartly an' the colors are dipped as I ride past, holdin' my hand high. It's a thing to thrill a man an' make him always remember, an' as I ride down the canyon, I can almost hear my dead daddy chucklin, with pride, an' feel the warmth of his smile of joy. . . . Somethin' that somehow don't make me a bit sorry that I didn't get that shavetail's white hawss, after all!

WILD FEUDISTS OF

Gun-hung cowmen waited grimly for the wedding which would stop forever the bloody McQueen-Bassiter range war. But willful Honey McQueen had no intention of sacrificing herself in that strange ceremony, even though fate had written that there must either be a marriage —or a massacre!

CHAPTER ONE

When Feudists Meet

THE wedding which was to take place at noon meant far more to the Pronghorn country than the mere joining of a man and woman in the holy bonds of matrimony. It meant the end of the ugly Bassiter-McQueen feud which loomed over the range like a destroying blight.

Pretty Honey McQueen, the blonde daughter of stern, proud Jackson Mc-

HAT PEAK RANGE

Novelette of Blizzard Cowmen

By CLIFF FARRELL

Kit McQueen spurred straight for Ute Buck's horse. . . .

Queen, was to become the bride of Sherm Bassiter, eldest son of Black Dan Bassiter from Hat Peak. That would unite two hot-blooded families whose enmity was splitting the cattle land into two armed camps.

That was why all of the range folk waited in anxious hope as the wedding party assembled at Jackson McQueen's ranch house. Prayers were being offered up by the women of both factions that nothing would happen to prevent this marriage. The women were remembering the many graves that had been dug in Bassiter country on Hat Peak and on the McQueen range in the lower benches during

outbreaks of the ancient feud in the past. They were also remembering the ominous accusations of rustling the factions were hurling back and forth, which were fanning the smouldering fires of hatred into seething life again, after a dozen years of comparative peace.

The men were keeping their fingers crossed. They were remembering the enmity which dated back to a forgotten cause. Mutual distrust was their heritage. There were irreconcilables on both sides who were openly predicting treachery at the wedding gathering. Ugly rumors were being whispered around that this marriage would never take place.

Because of that all of the Bassiter men, as they came riding down from Hat Peak, carried six-shooters hidden under their broadcloth Sunday coats. And the McQueens were similarly armed and jealously ready to resent any affront.

Canuck Pete's roadhouse at the river bridge five miles west of the McQueen ranch was doing a rushing business. There, neutral ranchers and homesteaders gathered to await the news that might mean war or lasting peace to the range.

BIG LUKE McQUEEN, a distant relative of Jackson McQueen, stood at the bar with a half-emptied quart bottle of whiskey in his hand which he kept tilting frequently as he talked.

"Look at 'em," he derided, pointing through a frost-rimmed window at a party of Bassiters who were riding up the snow-covered trail. "The Black Bassiters, they call themselves! Black, hell! Yaller's their real color. Scratch a Bassiter an' you'll hit chicken blood. They've rustled an' butchered McQueen beef fer years, an' now they cook up a slick scheme to wrap a petticoat around their scaley hides so as to keep from gettin' square. I'd sooner see Honey McQueen dead than married to Sherm Bassiter."

"They tell me it's a real love match, Luke," remarked a thin-beaked, cold-eyed cattleman named Con Gilbert. "Honey McQueen is said to be plumb loco about Sherm Bassiter."

"Which goes to show how easy you kin fool a woman," Big Luke growled. "Everybody but Honey knows that Sherm Bassiter is only marryin' her to prevent us McQueens from goin' up on Hat Peak an' cleanin' house. The Bassiters have stole all the cattle they kin safely git away with an' now they're smart enough to marry into the McQueen family so they kin whine for peace an' friendship. If Honey knew about that little French breed dancin' girl Sherm Bassiter runs around with, she'd never go through with this. After she gets hitched, she'll find herself playin' second fiddle to Lola Montana. She'll be a wife in name only."

"You lie in your teeth, Luke," a voice said.

Big Luke McQueen hadn't noticed the new arrival who had stepped into the roadhouse, and was standing listening.

It was Jay Bassiter, brother of the man Big Luke was accusing of cowardice. Jay Bassiter was about twenty-five, stockily built, with rugged chin and jaw. He had the straight, thick black hair, and dark eyes characteristic of the Bassiters. Owning a little mountain ranch on the north flank of Hat Peak, he was the best bronc-peeler and tie-down man in the country, and had a reputation as a reckless, chance-taking daredevil. He stripped off his wolf-skin gloves and slapped cold-numbed palms against his thighs.

Big Luke hooked his elbows on the bar, surveying Jay Bassiter from bloodshot eyes. "I whipped hell out o' you a time or two when we was buttons," he sneered. "You don't seem to have learned yore lesson yet. When a man calls me a liar he admits that he made a mistake, or he stands ready to fight."

Jay Bassiter stripped off his saddle coat, and men breathed a little easier when they

saw that he did not pack a gun. Beneath the coat he wore a blue store suit over a white shirt and a black bow tie, showing that he was bound for the wedding.

"You lie when you say my brother is marryin' Honey McQueen for any other reason than because he's head over heels in love with her," he said with deliberation. "You lie when you say Sherm has any interest in Lola Montana. An' you lie when you say us Bassiters have been rustlin' from the McQueens. There's your answer, Luke."

Con Gilbert nudged Big Luke and laughed. "It's your move, Luke," he prodded.

Big Luke shed his gaudy mackinaw coat, and laid aside his gun-belt. "There'll be one Bassiter missin' at the weddin'," he grinned.

Jay Bassiter was half a head shorter than Big Luke but there was solid bulk and breadth to his shoulders. When they were striplings, because Big Luke had been older and bigger, Jay Bassiter had always come out loser in those juvenile encounters. They were grown men now, but Jay Bassiter knew that he was still outweighed and over-matched as he walked out into the hard-packed snow in front of the roadhouse.

Con Gilbert pushed the onlookers back. "Give 'em room," he warned. "An' no interference."

Gilbert owned the Triangle 9 outfit on the north toe of Hat Peak. He professed to be neutral in the Bassiter-McQueen feud, but he and Big Luke were in the habit of playing poker and drinking together at Canuck Pete's place.

"I've got a bankroll that says Luke will knock out Bassiter inside of five minutes," Con Gilbert chuckled as he stepped back. "Anybody want a chance at my money?"

There were no takers among the neutral onlookers, but Jay Bassiter said: "I'll take a hundred of that, Gilbert."

"It'll be the easiest money you ever made, Con," Big Luke promised. "Put up your hands, Bassiter, an' take what's comin'."

BIG LUKE moved in on his black-haired opponent. They closed in a silent, savage exchange of punches. One of the big man's heavy fists raked Jay's jaw, leaving a bleeding gash. He countered with a left and felt his knuckles grind against teeth.

Luke McQueen kept ploughing ahead, his mashed lips streaming. His weight gave him an added advantage in the icy, foot-packed snow. Jay slipped to a knee, and the big man towered over him throwing a fusilade of punches. Jay dove low at the big man's knees, and Big Luke hit the frozen snow with a crash. They rolled over, slashing and jabbing at short range.

Big Luke locked an arm around Jay's neck, and chopped at his face with short lefts. Jay broke that grip and got to one knee. Luke's unshaven jaw was wide open and Jay landed with a full smash. The big man's head rocked back, the whites of his eyes showing.

Another punch would level Big Luke McQueen. But a hand caught Jay's arm as he set himself to deliver the knockout. He was dragged violently back, off balance.

Big Luke, taking advantage of his chance, reared up with a snarl, and swung a sledge-hammer blow. It might have killed Jay had it landed squarely, but the same hand that had exposed him to that punch, dragged him out of its path before it connected.

A clear, angry voice was saying. "Stop it! Stop it! Blast you, Luke McQueen, stand back."

Through a trickle of blood Jay saw a trim girl standing there imperiously, lashing Luke McQueen back with a torrent of angry denunciation.

"You both ought to be horsewhipped," the girl was panting. "The idea of you

two rolling around in the snow in a drunken brawl, today of all days! If you've got to act like Digger Injuns full of firewater go out in the brush somewhere and maul each other to your heart's content. But I won't have any whiskey trouble here in sight of the trail on my sister's wedding day. It might ruin everything."

CHAPTER TWO

Death's Wedding Party

BIG LUKE retreated hastily. All the McQueens had learned to fear the fiery temper of Kit McQueen, sister of the girl Sherm Bassiter was to take as a bride at high noon. Wearing a short, fur jacket whose high collar emphasized the rich coppery hue of her hair, and a dark riding skirt and trim saddle boots, she stood there, her blue eyes flashing. A horse stood ground-tied on the nearby trail.

Kit McQueen turned on Jay. "Look at you," she snapped. "With the wedding only an hour away you're covered with blood, and your shirt torn to ribbons. Who's got a clean shirt that will fit this jughead? He's supposed to act as best man at the wedding. Someone dig up a piece of raw beefsteak for that eye. And fetch some arnica and caustic. I'll do my best to fix him up so that he'll be presentable at the ceremony."

Kit McQueen's voice lashed Canuck Pete into hasty obedience. Jay shrugged and silently let the red-headed girl wash the gore from his face with an icy, soaked towel the roadhouse keeper brought.

"Are you sober enough to go through with it?" she asked bitingly.

Jay did not bother to deny that he was drunk. He turned and looked at Big Luke who glowered in the background. "She cheated me out of winnin' that hundred," he said. "I'll try my luck another time, Luke."

He walked to his horse, and swung into the saddle. Kit McQueen overtook him as he headed up the trail toward her father's ranch. She studied him disdainfully.

"Keep that beefsteak on the eye until you're in sight of the ranch," she ordered. "That swollen lip won't look so pretty at a wedding, but maybe you can keep your head down. The shirt I borrowed from Canuck Pete is a couple sizes too small. Don't take a deep breath while the preacher is saying the words, or you'll pop buttons all over the place!"

"I'd have cleaned Luke if you hadn't interfered," Jay said. "You McQueens all stand together, don't you?"

"I think Luke would have taken care of himself," she said, smiling icily. "I only horned in because I didn't want my sister's wedding broken up by two scatter-brained men. It happens that she loves your brother—though God knows why she picked a Bassiter as a husband when the world is full of real men. It would break her heart if the old feud got started again."

Jay rode along in sultry silence. The hoofs of their horses crunched icy snow. A warm, unseasonable chinook had blown for a day and a night, thawing the range, but now the temperature was plunging again, and the wind had a razor edge.

JAY was thinking hard. He had tried without success to trace down the source of the ugly rumors that were flooding the range, linking his brother's name with that of the notorious dancehall entertainer, Lola Montana. There were hints that his marriage to Honey McQueen was only a matter of politics to protect his clan from reprisals for the rustling that was going on.

Jay knew his big, serious-minded, slow-spoken brother too well to believe these stories. It wasn't in Sherm's nature to break a woman's heart by treachery.

But he could picture the possible con-

sequences of that malicious gossip. There had been no open conflict between the Bassiters and McQueens for years, but tension was nearing the exploding point. Beef cattle had been vanishing from the Bassiter range on Hat Peak for more than two years, and the loss was running into big money. The majority of the clan believed that the McQueens were back of the stealing. On the other hand the McQueens claimed to be suffering heavily from rustling also, and it was no secret that they blamed their hereditary enemies.

Jay knew that the majority of the men were packing guns to the wedding. His mind quailed, when he pictured the havoc that would ensue if an open dispute involving his brother's character arose at the gathering.

Kit McQueen was silent also during that five-mile ride, and Jay heard her draw a sigh as they jogged in sight of her father's ranch. The clans were assembled in full force. Because of the large number of guests, the wedding was to be held in the open, in spite of the biting cold of the wintry day. The deep log porch of Jackson McQueen's ranch house was to serve as the altar.

There was no friendly mingling among the Bassiters and McQueens. They stood in two silent groups there in the snow-cleared ranch yard, waiting. Distrust and suspicion was like an electric force in the air as Jay dismounted and tied up his mount.

His husky, keen-eyed father looked at his bruised face and frowned. Black Dan Bassiter began to frame a question, then thought better of it.

"You're late, son," was all he said. "Sherm's in the house gettin' slicked up for the weddin'. Maybe you better go in an, see how he's standin' the ordeal."

Kit McQueen beckoned Jay. "I'll show you in," she said curtly, and led him into the rambling, big ranch house to a rear room. Then she hurried away.

Sherm Bassiter was a year older than Jay with quiet, intent dark eyes and a straight, sensitive mouth. They gripped hands.

"I was beginnin' to think you'd run out on me, Jay," Sherm grinned. "Do I look good enough to marry the sweetest, prettiest girl in the world?"

Sherm in his dark broadcloth suit, polished high-heeled boots, white collar and string tie was tall and virile and handsome. Jay thought of their mother, dead these half a dozen years, and pictured the shining pride this stalwart figure would have aroused in her eyes.

Then Sherm saw the marks of combat on Jay's face, and a cold dismay touched his happiness.

"A snorty bronk unloaded me," Jay explained quickly. "How soon do you face the sky-pilot, Sherm?"

As he spoke a grandfather's clock in the hall sent the noon-time hour chiming mellowly through the house.

"This is my wedding hour," Sherm said remotely as he studied the bruises on Jay's face. "This means happiness to Honey an' me, Jay, but it'll mean happiness to plenty more people too. There'll be no more rustling back an' forth across the old deadline, after we prove that a Bassiter and a McQueen can get along together. The old feud will be buried in a few minutes, Jay. There'll be no more fightin'."

A quick step sounded at the door, and a hand tapped demandingly. The red-haired Kit McQueen stepped into the room, closed the loor quickly and stood against it. She was agitated, and so pale that her lips looked like ashen scars against her oval face.

"Honey's gone," she said huskily, looking at Sherm.

"Gone?"

"There'll be no wedding," Kit McQueen said. "My sister isn't marrying you, Sherm Bassiter. It was all a mistake. She left a note for me explaining it."

Sherm Bassiter stood there a moment, and then he threw back his head and laughed without mirth. "An' I thought she was sweet an' honest, even though she was a McQueen," he bit out. "But it looks like she's like all the rest of the breed. She played me for a fool, led me on just so she could make us Bassiters the laughing stock of the range!"

KIT McQUEEN suddenly burned with fury. "Honesty," she jeered. "You dare speak of honor, you—you cheat! Go back to your breed roadhouse girl, Sherm Bassiter. That's where you belong. Honey learned all about your honkytonk sweetheart before it was too late. Lola Montana came here this morning and pleaded with my sister not to steal you away from her. You'll find your black-haired songbird at Canuck Pete's place waiting to console you!"

Sherm was staring blankly. "Lola Montana?" he muttered incredulously. "Why—?"

"There's no mistake," the red-haired McQueen girl panted. "The whole range has been talking about it for weeks. It was you who made a laughing stock of my sister. Get out of this house. You defile the place. Get out! Get out!"

"Honey wouldn't have believed a lie like that if she really loved me," Sherm said, his voice suddenly hard. "All she wanted was an excuse to hurt the Bassiters."

He walked out of the room, throwing off Jay's restraining hand. Through the frosted window Jay saw his brother stride across the deserted rear ranch yard, mount a horse, and ride away into the timber beyond the corrals, unseen by the waiting clansmen at the front of the house.

A hand rapped on the door and Jackson McQueen called, "All ready for the ceremony, boys. The best man and the groom are wanted at their places. The wedding march is about to strike up. I'm going to my daughter's room to take her to the altar."

Kit McQueen and Jay looked at each other aghast. Jay moved toward the door, but the girl blocked his path. "What are you going to do?" she demanded breathlessly.

"Tell the Black Bassiters that they came down from the mountain to be publicly humiliated," Jay said harshly. "What else?"

"You fool! Hell would break loose out there."

"You McQueens should have thought of that before you framed up this smart scheme," Jay said.

There was stark horror in her blue eyes. "There are women and children out there," she gasped. "We can't let this happen. Don't you understand? It'll either be a marriage—or a massacre."

She was looking at him in a way that caused Jay to step back. But she followed him insistently. "You're a Bassiter," she blurted fiercely. "I'm a McQueen. That will stop them."

"You're loco," Jay muttered, stunned. "You don't mean that you an' me—?"

"What else could I mean?" she flashed. "We've got to go through with this. You and I are going out there and be married!"

Jay tried to laugh scornfully, but the sound died in his throat. "Me? Marry you?"

She returned his irony with equal scorn. "A fitting match, after all. The wild, barroom brawler, Jay Bassiter, and the redheaded, sharp-tongued shrew of the McQueen clan. They say you're a fire-eating, chance-taking buckaroo, a tamer of bad broncs and tough men. I'm known as a bad-tempered hell-cat, too ornery to even be worth shooting. Neither of us would win any prizes at a popularity contest among our relatives, but we can prevent useless bloodshed out there. Those hotheads are set on a hair-trigger. Both the

Bassiters and the McQueens came here expecting treachery of some kind. They won't stop to think or reason if they learn that your brother and my sister have broken up. They'll tangle like mad wolves."

Jay knew she was speaking the truth. She had stated the case in a few words—"A marriage or a massacre!"

"Neither of us have anything to lose—or gain," Kit McQueen added. "I don't like it any better than you, but we have a duty to our families. If they can get together just once, and talk things over, they'll bury the hatchet forever."

Jay's bruised lips twisted in a derisive grin. "When you talk about duty, then you've got me collared," he said. "I've always been a hound for duty. I'll be there waitin' at the altar as a sacrifice. Here comes your dad, an' it sounds like he's in a lather. He's learned about your sister. You can tell him anything that comes to mind about this change in plans."

Jay walked out of the room, brushing past the excited Jackson McQueen. He strode to the open veranda, where the minister was waiting, and looked down at the assembled clansmen.

"Strike up the wedding march," he said. He beckoned his father. "You'll act as best man, Dad. There's been a slight change in details. Me an' Kit McQueen are gettin' hooked up, instead of Sherm an' her sister."

CHAPTER THREE

At Hell's Road-Ranch

THERE was a stunned silence, then a wild stir. Jay signaled a woman who sat at the organ inside the house, and she hastily began working the stops. The strains of the wedding march rolled out into the biting, wintry day, silencing the puzzled comment.

Kit McQueen's mother came from the house, pale and agitated, looked at Jay doubtfully, then turned away to hide a flood of tears.

To the music of the organ Jackson McQueen appeared, his arm linked in that of his red-haired daughter. He was palpably confused and glared at Jay with suspicion. Kit McQueen wore the bridal veil that her sister had abandoned.

The minister blinked, puzzled, but the hard glint in Jay's eyes forbade any questions. Swallowing, the frocked man began to read the marriage service.

There was a faint, twisted smile on Jay's face. He looked down at Kit McQueen's hand which lay in his palm. That hand seemed ridiculously small. He studied her face with closer attention. Her eyes were large, well-spaced, her nose small, with a little impudent tilt. Her lips were well-formed, and her chin resolute. A hell-cat, but not a bad-looking one, he remotely conceded.

Kit McQueen nudged him, and he automatically began the responses to the vows. He heard the final solemn words that completed the service, then stood there at a loss.

The girl lifted her face. "Kiss me," she whispered impatiently. "Don't stand there like a dunce. Try, at least, to act like a happy bridegroom. Dad is watching every move I make. He's suspicious that this is only a fake marriage."

Jay bent, brushing her lips. He turned and shook hands with the grim, unconvinced Jackson McQueen. There was a hesitation among the people below. Then the women-folk forced the issue by moving toward each other, exchanging embraces. That broke the ice. Sheepishly the Bassiter and McQueen men began to mingle.

Cowbells broke into raucous clanging. Shotguns and six-shooters exploded into the air. A wild celebration erupted in the frozen ranch yard. Riders went speeding away to carry the news over the range.

The Bassiters and the McQueens were united at last!

True to cow-country custom, men descended on Jay, seizing him for the usual hazing of a bridegroom. He was tossed across a packsaddle which was tied to a cedar fence rail, carried on the shoulders of the Bassiter and McQueen men. They bucked him off time after time into snowbanks. Men rubbed lampblack on his face, and they hog-tied him, and held him down while they poured raw whiskey down his throat.

As a climax they mounted him on a flea-bitten burro with a reversed Mexican saddle, equipped with huge spurs and an enormous sombrero and paraded him into the house to present him to the bride.

Jay was half-drunk from the whiskey that had been poured down his throat. He stumbled over the big Mexican spurs, and the hat came down over his ears and eyes. He swept off the sombrero and bowed low to Kit McQueen.

"You look natural," she said with a sugary smile. "Come with me."

She led him out of the noisy main room and closed the door. She donned her fur coat, and handed him his saddle jacket and gloves and hat. "Dad has the horses waiting back of the corral," she said. "The coast is clear."

She led him into the deserted rear ranch yard. Jay wasn't able to think clearly until he found himself mounted and circling away from the ranch, and behind them came the sounds of the wedding celebration going full force.

The icy wind cleared his head, and he looked at the small, fur-clad girl who rode at his side. "Whither bound?" he said gaily.

Deep color ascended slowly from Kit McQueen's throat. "To your J Cross ranch of course," she said.

That sobered Jay completely. The girl spoke again, her voice suddenly hard. "We've got to make this look real for awhile," she snapped. "I'll have to stay at your place until our families really get together. They're only pretending to be friendly now, as a favor to the bride and groom. The old mosshorns aren't entirely reconciled. They'd be at each other's throats in an instant if they suspected that we had run a blaze on them. They're so full of conceit and cussed pride they'd take it as an insult. Give them a day or two to get acquainted. Then they'll really bury the hatchet."

"Sure," Jay said hollowly. "Sure."

Somehow that stilted response sent her into a blasting surge of fury. "I assure you I'll have that ceremony annulled at the first opportunity," she panted. "Do you think I'm enjoying this?"

THEY rode on in strained silence, into the cold dusk of the short December day. A bitter wind came sweeping off the frozen surface of Pronghorn River, knifing through their heavy coats chilling them to the bone. The temperature was plunging far below zero.

The lights of Canuck Pete's roadhouse glinted across the snow through the deepening twilight, and Jay looked at the wind-pinched cheeks of the girl in the high fur collar.

"We've got more than ten miles still to go up the mountain," he said, "an' it's twenty below already. Can do?"

"Of course," she responded. "I'm no tenderfoot. But a little brandy might help. This head-wind is a nuisance."

"I'll bring you a snort," Jay grinned, pulling up at the roadhouse tie-rail.

The girl slid stiffly to the ground, beating her gloved hands and stamping her small boots in the snow. She moved toward the door of the place at his side.

Jay halted, looking at her in surprise. "I said I'd bring it out to you," he reminded her.

"I heard you," she sniffed. "But I don't intend to sit out here in the cold like a

squaw while you're warming yourself beside a hot stove. I could use a little stove heat myself."

"You can't—" Jay began, aghast.

"The devil I can't," she snapped. "Oh, I know that women like me aren't welcome inside the sacred portals of a trail-side barroom. Only you big, lusty men who rule the earth have that pleasant privilege on a cold day, while we women stay out and get chilblains so as to remain in blissful ignorance of what a saloon looks like inside. I'm cold, and I aim to do something about it. If this shocks you and the rest of the males, so be it."

She pushed open the door and stepped into the roadhouse, with Jay following, grinning. They paused there. The place was well-nigh deserted. The drinkers of the morning, having heard the news of the wedding, had pulled out for their home ranches ahead of the oncoming cold spell.

Canuck Pete was lolling on the lookout stool with a solitaire hand spread on the bar. Big Luke McQueen snored in a drunken stupor at a table, his head pillowed on his arms.

AT ANOTHER table a girl was sitting on a man's knee, her arm draped around his neck, running her long-nailed, white fingers affectionately through his hair. The man was Con Gilbert, the money-spending, cold-eyed owner of the Triangle 9. The girl was the singing dancer, Lola Montana.

Lola Montana arose, startled. She made Jay think of a disturbed, sleek feline. Her hair was too black and glossy and well-kept, her lips too vividly red and perfect. Her almond-cast eyes, under beaded lashes, could be soft and alluring or they could be hard and cold and calculating. Wearing a silk, wine-colored gown, Lola Montana made a striking, alien figure in this low-ceilinged road-ranch.

Kit McQueen stood there a moment coolly taking in the situation. Then she walked down the sawdust-covered floor.

"Your broken heart seems to mend easily, Miss Montana," she said icily, as she paused before the dancer. "This morning you were weeping on my sister's shoulder, begging her not to steal Sherm Bassiter away from you. A few hours later you're in the arms of another man. You broke up my sister's marriage with your tears and lies. There's only one way to deal with a woman like you."

And Kit McQueen slapped Lola Montana in the face.

Con Gilbert came to his feet with a growl, and leaped toward the red-haired girl. "You cheap little trouble-makin'—" he began.

But Jay reached him then. He whirled the man around. Con Gilbert instantly drove a punch at Jay's jaw. Jay batted it aside, and knocked him down with a smash to the face. Gilbert came to his knees, streaking for his six-shooter, but Jay dove on him, pinning his gun arm down.

They fought for a hectic minute before Jay twisted the gun from his grasp and sent it slithering away out of reach. He landed a full right to the man's jaw, and Con Gilbert crashed to the floor, dazed and out of the fight.

Canuck Pete came charging down the room, a blackjack dangling from his wrist, but Kit McQueen's taut voice stopped him.

"Back up, mister, or I'll shoot your legs out from under you."

She had picked up Con Gilbert's six-shooter. She also had a gold-handled stiletto in her left hand. Jay recognized the knife as one that Lola Montana usually carried in a knee sheath.

The dancer was standing against a wall, with her hair disheveled, spitting and snarling like a wet cat. Big Luke McQueen still snored on, his whiskey sleep undisturbed by the turmoil.

Canuck Pete looked at the cocked gun in Kit McQueen's hand, and began backing up.

"Get your flask of brandy, Jay Bassiter," the red-headed girl said calmly. "And we'll resume our journey. If you have any use for a knife, here's a gift for you. I took it from that painted cat as she was about to present it to you point foremost."

Jay was grinning as he helped himself to a flask from the back bar. He tossed a dollar in the sawdust as he walked out with Kit McQueen.

THEY didn't say anything for a long time after they had loped across the bridge and were pushing up the mountain trail through the gathering, freezing twilight.

"A barroom brawler," Jay said reflectively.

"Shut your mouth," Kit McQueen exploded. "Don't you ever dare mention that affair to any living person. I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself. I lost my temper completely."

"You seem to have found it again," Jay remarked. "I'm sorry I missed seeing you take that rib-slicer away from Lola. I was too busy arguin' with Con Gilbert. Lola's always had the reputation of being able to take care of herself in a ruckus. You're the female bar room champ now. You won the title from her."

"Damn you!" the red headed girl warned furiously. "Dry up, before I—"

A rider loomed up in the trail ahead of them. It was Uncle Billy Bassiter, a seamy, white-bearded patriarch of Jay's Hat Peak clan. Uncle Billy ducked his head in apology to Kit McQueen.

"I hate tuh bother you on yore weddin' day, Jay," he said, "but Sherm's gone on a hell-bendin' spree. He's down in thet sheep camp on the Beaver Fork, drinkin' white-mule likker like it was well water, an' spoilin' for trouble. He's already picked fist fights with a couple sheepwalkers, cleaned 'em, too."

"Snake him out of there, Uncle Billy," Jay instructed. "Rope an' hog-tie him if you have to. Bring him up to my place, and I'll sober him up."

"Wait," Kit McQueen spoke up. "Take him to Aunt Lettie Hilliard's instead." She looked at Jay. "My sister's hiding out at Aunt Lettie's also. It's my guess that those two idiots will fall into each other's arms when they meet!"

She turned to Uncle Billy. "Tell my sister that I said she was a fool, and that she let Lola Montana run a high blaze on her. Tell her I wormed the truth out of that honkytonk girl and that Sherm is innocent. Honey will believe that. She knows I wouldn't lie to her."

Jay and the red-haired girl rode on in silence after Uncle Billy had spurred away to salvage Sherm Bassiter from trouble at the sheep camp. Kit McQueen finally glanced guiltily at him.

"Well, say it," she challenged defiantly. "You were right, and I was wrong. I admit my mistake. That was a put-up job on my sister. Somebody sent that painted vixen to Honey with that tear-jerking story about your brother. Big Luke probably planned it. He's always been a trouble-maker. He's only an apron-string cousin, but he's done more than any other man to keep the old grudge alive by preaching hatred of you Bassiters. He claims to know that the Bassiters are the ones who have been stealing McQueen cattle."

"It looked to me like Lola is in love with Con Gilbert," Jay remarked slowly. "Maybe it was Con who put her up to that stunt. Con Gilbert has been rollin' high for the past couple of years. He plays sky-limit poker, and don't seem to worry about how much he loses. He rides the best horse flesh in the country an' dresses an' drinks like money don't mean a thing to him. His Triangle 9 outfit ain't big enough to raise honest beef that fast."

Kit McQueen looked at him, startled. "Us McQueens have been losing plenty of cattle in the past year or two," she

said thoughtfully. "Nearly a thousand head. We thought that—that—"

"That the Bassiters was runnin' the beef away," Jay finished it for her. "It happens that we've been losing stock in the same way. We blamed the McQueens. Maybe both of us was wrong. Maybe it'd be an idea to keep an eye on Con Gilbert's Triangle 9 in the future. Maybe we've both been blind to the real truth."

"It was the rustling that revived all the old hatred," the girl remarked. "The feud was beginning to be forgotten but it came back to life when cattle started disappearing. Now that you bring it to my attention I remember that Big Luke and Con Gilbert have been mighty close friends for the past couple of years. And Luke seems to have plenty of money to spend, though as far as I know he's never done a hard day's work in his life."

Jay's ranch house loomed out of the wan, frigid moonlight. It was built of notched lodgepole pine, chinked with mud, with a long main room and a kitchen. Snow was banked almost to the eaves on the weather side. Flanking the house was a sizeable shelter shed and hay barn for the saddle string, and a pole cavvy yard.

The girl was so numbed by cold that Jay had to lift her from the saddle, and steady her steps as they entered the house. She knelt gratefully before the roaring blaze he built in the broad rock fireplace, holding her hands to the leaping flames.

Jay stabled and fed the horses. When he returned she was fueling the cookstove in the kitchen. Warmth stole through the low, solidly-built cabin. The color came back to her cheeks. Hot coffee and food brought a sparkle to her eyes.

A taut constraint held them now. Kit McQueen's self-assurance had ebbed away. She kept glancing shyly around, inspecting the furnishings. It was a man's habitation, neat, but rough and practical. Saddle gear, chaps, lariats and game trophies adorned the walls. Benches and tables were of heavy cedar, planed and pegged together by Jay's own hands. Her eyes kept straying dubiously to the one bunk.

Jay pointed to the bunk. "You can turn in there," he said, breaking a long silence. His voice in his own ears, seemed loud and crass. "I'll hole up in the hay out in the barn."

"You'll freeze," she objected quickly. "It's thirty below out there. How about —why not—that is, you must sleep in the kitchen. It'll be warmer."

"I reckon it might be all right," Jay grinned, "seein' as how we're married."

She flushed. After he had carried soogans and blankets into the kitchen she slammed the intervening door, and he heard her wedge a chair against it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Stalks the Storm

JAY ate the breakfast that Kit McQueen had cooked. He ate heartily, and made a mental note to spy on her the next time she mixed a biscuit batter so as to learn the secret of those golden brown morsels that melted in his mouth like butter. The sizzling beefsteak also had an unusual flavor and tenderness, though he tried to put that down to imagination. Even the hashed brown potatoes and coffee held an undeniable savor.

He resented the way she bossed the kitchen, refusing any advice or help. He resented the way she had turned up her nose at his time-tried, grease-stained flour-sack apron, and burned it in the firebox of the stove. And perhaps most of all he resented the practiced efficiency and speed with which she prepared the meal. Cooking had always been an ordeal with Jay.

He pushed back his empty coffee mug, rolled his cigarette and arose. He slid into his saddle coat, tied a scarf around his ears, and drew on thick gloves. "I'll be gone all day, tailin' up," he explained.

"There'll be a lot of critters down, with that freeze comin' so fast on the heels of a warm spell."

She nodded. "You might saddle up for me," she said. "I'll be along directly and give you a hand after I straighten up the kitchen."

Jay stared. "You?"

"Me?" she mimicked. "Let me tell you that I've tailed up my share of cattle. It really doesn't require brute strength, provided you use your wits. It'll be more interesting than sitting in this cabin all day twiddling my thumbs."

Jay scratched his head. He decided that she was only running a brag to impress him. He rode away, grinning shrewdly.

Many of his J Cross cattle were down. The unseasonable chinook, breaking a siege of severe weather, had enervated the animals. Scores of she-stock and many steers, had been lulled into stretching out on warm hillsides or against the lee of cutbanks. There they had been caught by the sudden drop in temperature, and, with bovine passiveness, they lacked the incentive to rise again.

That meant tailing up, and prodding the listless brutes into the notion of living again. Jay began working, heaving the resigned cattle to their feet, quirting and badgering them into a fighting mood, restoring their ambition to rustle for a livelihood.

He had been at the task an hour when the girl came riding through the deep snow. There were half a dozen cattle down in the snow-choked draw where Jay was working. She dismounted and tackled the job with brisk assurance.

She could tail up cattle. Jay watched her twist the tail of a big, wall-eyed steer, badger it to its feet, and nag it into bellowing fury. The animal charged her, but she nimbly skipped into the saddle and out of harm's reach with the indifference of a top hand. Then she tackled another animal.

Jay could not quell a surge of admiration as he watched her. He took it for granted that she would soon weary of the gruelling toil in the biting temperature, but she fooled him again. She worked with him hour after hour without complaint.

The clear, keen cold gave way to a different, more penetrating type of weather. A gray haze crept over the sky. The sun receded into that bleak pall, and was finally blotted out. The timbered hills became dull-colored, without depth or form, and the air was like clammy ice.

Jay kept a close eye on Kit McQueen now. When he saw the tell-tale bloodless hue that began to appear on the tip of her nose, he called a halt at once and rubbed her face with snow to draw the frost.

"You'd make some cowboy a good wife," he suddenly said.

The idea had leaped abruptly into his mind, but he hadn't meant to put it into spoken words. He looked at her, startled at the way he had betrayed his thoughts.

Kit McQueen flushed and turned away. "We'd better be getting back to work," she said.

They resumed the freezing, dangerous task. The gray haze deepened above. Jay kept watching the saw-toothed rims of the mountains to the west. Misty streamers were spreading out from the divide, hanging in wavering banners against the leaden sky. This was wind-driven snow. A blizzard was rolling over the rim upon the Pronghorn country.

JAY and the red-headed girl worked like slaves, racing the oncoming storm. It was late afternoon, and they were five miles south of Jay's ranch, when he drew a weary sigh.

"That cleans up the job," he said. "We'll hit for shelter now. That snorter's comin' fast!"

They crowded their horses in a race for the ranch. Jay pulled up suddenly as they

were crossing a long draw, and they stared at the frozen marks of cattle in the wind-packed snow.

"Cattle hazed this way by two riders," Jay muttered, reading the sign. "About forty head. This draw cuts across the mountain toward Con Gilbert's range. These steers was shoved through durin' the chinook thaw."

Snow came slanting out of the sky then, stinging their eyes like hard-driven sand. They heard the wild rush of the storm bearing down through the pine tops. They reefed their horses ahead. The trail of rustled cattle must wait now. Shelter was the vital necessity with a mountain blizzard at hand.

They were within a mile of the ranch when Jay rose in the stirrups with a cry of dismay. Smoke was rolling up from the clearing where his spread stood. They saw the sullen glint of leaping flames through the timber, and on the cold air came the acrid tang of wood smoke.

"The ranch," Jay yelled. "It's on fire."

They crashed through thick brush, bending low in the saddle. Without warning a horseman, traveling at breakneck speed, loomed up in the path of the horse the girl was riding. The animals lunged high to avoid a collision.

Jay recognized the intruder. He was a swart, saturnine cowboy who went by the name of Ute Buck—one of Con Gilbert's Triangle 9 riders, and he had the reputation as a tough hand. He had killed a sheepman in a gun-fight a few months in the past, and had carved up other men in drunken knife fights.

UTE BUCK steadied his horse, glaring at Jay. Without a word of warning he ripped out a six-shooter. There was murder in Ute Buck's eyes, and Jay, a dozen feet away, had no chance to draw in time to defend himself.

But Kit McQueen spurred her horse violently toward the man's animal. Ute Buck fired as his mount reeled from the collision, and his bullet missed, glancing from a tree trunk at Jay's side.

Then Jay's six-shooter was in his fist. He fired an instant before Ute Buck could throw a second slug. His bullet struck the man in the throat, and Ute Buck reeled back, his head sagging. His six-shooter exploded in his convulsive fingers and the shot struck Jay's horse just below an ear, killing the animal in its tracks.

Ute Buck's body flopped from the saddle, his horse stampeding wildly away, fighting the bit.

Kit McQueen's mount went to pieces, terrified by the shooting, and raced away into heavy foliage. She was torn from the saddle by low-hanging pine branches and hurled into the snow.

Jay had leaped clear of his dead horse as it went down. He glanced at Ute Buck, and saw that the man was dead. Holstering his gun he ran to where Kit lay.

"I'm all right," she gasped as he picked her up. "It only knocked the breath out of me."

But as Jay placed her on her feet she uttered a cry of pain and fell against him. "My ankle!" she moaned.

Jay lifted her in his arms, and ran toward the clearing which was lighted by the red glow of fire. He was praying that at least the barn would be safe, but his heart sank as he ploughed through deep snow into sight of the fire.

Both the house and barn were red, billowing bonfires. Flames were leaping high into the air, whipped by the rising wind. The hissing of melting snow mingled with the sullen roar of the fire that was consuming the pitch logs.

The blizzard struck in full force then. Driving snow came in a blood-freezing blast, and the wind hit the clearing with a deafening screech. The storm only fanned the flames, speeding the destruction. There was no shelter here from the blizzard.

CHAPTER FIVE

Outcasts of the Blizzard

JAY carried the girl nearer the flames for the sake of the warmth they afforded. Crouching down so as to shelter her as much as possible from the howling blast of wind and snow he cut away her boot and the double pair of heavy wool stockings.

Her left ankle was beginning to swell. It was badly sprained, and it would be many days before she could use that foot for walking. Jay tore strips from the lining of his saddle coat, bound the foot, and restored the stockings.

The power of the storm was increasing each minute. The walls of the house and barn collapsed into flaming debris which began to dwindle as the flames were smothered by wind and driving snow.

"Ute Buck burned us out," Jay said. "He worked for Con Gilbert, which means that Gilbert likely paid him to set fire to the spread so as to get square for what happened last night at the road-ranch. Ute Buck knew we had caught him red-handed as he rode away. That's why he tried to kill me, so that I wouldn't come after him later on. He'd have finished me if you hadn't taken a hand. I won't forget that, Miss McQueen." There was a deep respect in his tone.

Her eyes twinkled. "I believe," she remarked. "That my legal name is now Mrs. Bassiter."

Jay looked at the hissing heap of logs where his house had stood. Except for that smoking mound, the clearing was a wind-churned turmoil of swirling snow. He moved the girl nearer the fading heat of the fire.

"It'll soon be dark, an' the storm is gettin' worse," he said. "Ute Buck turned my saddle string loose before settin' fire to the barn, an' they've drifted away. We're afoot, but we've got to find shelter quick. I'll build a travois for you."

He fought his way through the storm back to where his dead horse lay. He returned bringing his rope and the saddle strings and saddle blanket. Working with frenzied speed he broke limbs from pine trees. With his knife he peeled and notched two stout ten foot poles. Warming his hands occasionally on the dying fire, he laced cross pieces into place. The frame-work that he completed there in the wind-lashed clearing was that most primitive of all means of transportation, the Indian travois.

He tested its strength, then lifted the girl upon the frame, bundling her in as securely as possible, wrapping her feet in the saddle blanket, and lashing her securely down.

She caught his arm as he completed the preparations. "If—if it proves too tough, just leave me," she said.

Jay bent closer, looking into her face. Snow swirled against them, stinging his skin, beading her long eyelashes. He could see the pinch of the blizzard in her full cheeks.

"Just pull out an' leave you to freeze, eh?" He tried to say it jeeringly, but there was something wrong with his voice. "Just abandon you, an' save my own hide."

She couldn't meet his eyes. Jay lifted her chin. "God!" he said reverently. "You're sweet, an' good, an'—an' beautiful!"

Then he turned and lifted the poles of the improvised drag. He leaned forward and began moving away, drawing the burdened travois through the storm which whooped and screamed in the trees with icy malevolence.

Leaving the faint warmth of the ranch embers was like walking into icy hell. The dying glow of the smouldering logs was blotted out by the swirling storm before Jay had trudged twenty rods. From then on they were in a dizzy freezing maelstrom.

DARKNESS settled, and he paused in the lee of a boulder where he managed to strike a match. He glimpsed the girl's face in the quick flare before the wind extinguished the flame. He saw the steady courage in her eyes.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To Con Gilbert's ranch," he said briefly. "That's the nearest shelter. It's only about four more miles an' we're on an old loggin' trail that leads to his place. It's our only chance. The next closest ranch is a dozen miles the other direction."

Jay stepped between the poles again and surged ahead. He was traveling utterly blind now that darkness had blotted out all landmarks. He was forced to feel out the winding, narrow logging road which had been hewed across the mountainside. Often he blundered against trees and brush as the trail curved torturously.

Here and there deep drifts were piling up in which he floundered to his waist. More than once he traveled with his heart in his throat, battling wind and choking snow, feeling each step carefully ahead, fearing that he had lost the wagon road and might be wandering blindly on the mountainside, which was gashed by deep ravines and dizzy rock ledges.

Then again he would find himself still on the trail, which was their only chance for life. There were open stretches where the wind sent him reeling to sprawl full length, and there were other times when he had to pause in the scant lee of timber or rock outcrops to fight for breath and to flail the creeping, deadly numbness out of his arms and legs.

Each time he stopped Kit McQueen's responses to his questions as to her comfort were calm and devoid of fear. Jay knew that the injured ankle must be giving her hell as the travois jostled over this rough trail, but she gave no sign of pain.

The numbness was creeping through Jay in spite of his exertions. He could feel his heart thudding against his ribs as he fought his way up an endless ascent where the travois seemed to weigh tons. The

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do — well — there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine, I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well — this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be — all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about —it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well — just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 19, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable — but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was. — Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

descent beyond was almost as fearful, for he had to fight desperately to prevent the drag and the helpless girl from running wild down the slant. He breathed a prayer as he struck frozen level surface at the bottom, and identified it as Horn Creek. Con Gilbert's ranch was now only a mile away.

But that mile was across open benchland where the trail was lost beneath drifting snow. Jay could only trust to instinct and luck from then on. He quartered against the wind, hoping that it would not shift direction. He was like a dying man now, staggering blindly ahead, going through the motions of living.

The wind and snow was like an endless wall, yielding only when he bucked it with all his failing strength. Brush tripped him. He fell headlong into shallow gullies. Each time he arose, and fought his way around the obstacles. Yet always he went forward.

When he finally did see a faint yellow glow ahead, he didn't believe it until he brought up against a solid barrier. It was the side of a pole corral. That window light was real.

Jay dropped the travois bars. Like a man numbed by weary age, he laboriously cut the thongs that held the girl on the frame, and lifted her in his arms.

"We made it," he said, his voice hollow and far away against the roar of the storm. "We've hit Con Gilbert's ranch."

He carried her toward that inviting beacon. The rear of the house was dark, but there was a door. Jay opened it and almost fell into the unlighted kitchen. He closed the portal, and for a moment it seemed unnatural and still, for the closing of that door had shut out the wild wailing of the storm which had been in their ears without surcease for five hours.

The house was shaking to the battering of the wind, and the blizzard was screaming about the eaves, but to Jay and the girl he held in his arms, this comparative silence was a holy respite. They were silent for long seconds as they felt the warmth of the unlighted kitchen touch their half-frozen cheeks.

KIT McQUEEN began to quiver in his grasp. Jay realized that she was weeping, and he marveled at the ways of a woman which could face death for hours without a tremor, and break into tears now that safety had been won. Then he felt her arms stealing around his neck, tightening convulsively, and he knew now why she was weeping.

"I love you," he murmured. "I love you Kit."

"I know," she breathed. "I know. That's what brought us through the blizzard—both of us. That's what kept us alive."

Jay held her against him for a long time. Then he became gradually aware of the faint, distant murmur of men's voices in the house. Their entrance into the kitchen evidently had been unheard, by the men in the lighted living room at the front.

Jay placed the girl on a chair, and opened a door which showed a small inner room, leading to the main ranch room at the front. The opposite door stood ajar, and they could now hear plainly the voices from the fire-warmed main room.

"There'll be hell to pay if Jay Bassiter ever suspects that you had him burned out with a blizzard comin' on, Con." The speaker was Big Luke McQueen.

Con Gilbert's suave, dry voice answered. "He'll have no reason to suspect me. I told Ute to play it safe an' make sure he wasn't seen around the place. He must have holed up somewhere when the storm hit, or else he'd be back by this time. Jay Bassiter will blame the McQueens for burning him out. I hope to God he freezes to death tonight, an' that red-headed girl along with him. A man who lays hands on me the way he did at Canuck Pete's last night don't live long as a rule. If he

wriggles out of this storm tonight I'll take care of him in some other way."

"Murder is goin' a leetle too fur, ain't it, Con," Big Luke muttered uncomfortably. "I don't mind rustlin' a few cattle, but—"

"A *few* cattle!" Con Gilbert jeered. "You're modest ain't you, Luke? Accordin' to my records you an' me have split the profits on close to two thousand head o' McQueen an' Bassiter beef that you run across the mountain durin' the past three years. Here's your pay for the forty head you'n Ute brought in the other night."

There was a silence.

"Don't go soft on me, Luke," Con Gilbert added icily. "We've got to get rid of Jay Bassiter. It's a matter of more'n personal revenge with both of us. He pulled a smart stunt by marryin' Kit McQueen so as to stop that free-for-all fight we had framed up at the weddin' party. The McQueens an' Bassiters are likely to bury the hatchet for keeps as a result. If they ever start comparin' notes about the cattle they've lost they'll begin to savvy the truth.

"We've got to get 'em to fightin' like cats an' dogs again. Then we might get a chance to moonlight some more beef from both sides while they're busy killin' each other off. If Jay Bassiter was to be found dead, it would be blamed on some hard-shelled McQueen man. We could spread a few rumors around, just like we did about Sherm Bassiter. People are willin' to believe any kind o' gossip, an' Jay Bassiter's death would put 'em right where we want 'em—at each other's throats!"

Jay and Kit McQueen looked at each other in the faint light that seeped into the kitchen. A queer, grim smile showed on Jay's lips.

He flexed his fingers, making sure that the icy numbness was gone. Sliding silently out of his saddle-coat, he drew his six-shooter. Then he walked softly across the intervening room, pushed open the door, and stepped into the lighted main room.

CHAPTER SIX

Sold to a Dead Man!

CON GILBERT was lolling back in a leather easy chair, and Big Luke sat astraddle a straight-backed chair. There was a whiskey bottle and glasses between them on the table.

Con Gilbert looked up, and came to his feet with a convulsive leap. His hand streaked toward his six-shooter, then paused, and he stood rigid.

"Go ahead," Jay said softly. "I'd appreciate an excuse to blow out your yellow, treacherous heart, Con!"

Big Luke had twisted around. He froze staring into the round bore of Jay's gun.

Jay spoke again. "So you figured to bushwhack me, Con, if I escaped the blizzard? And you sent Ute Buck to burn me out, hopin' that me an' my wife would freeze to death? Ute Buck is dead, Con. I shot him through the gullet. Broke his neck like you'd kill a buzzard."

Con Gilbert backed slowly away. His sharp face was gray as a shroud. The blue veins stood out in a vivid network on his thin nose.

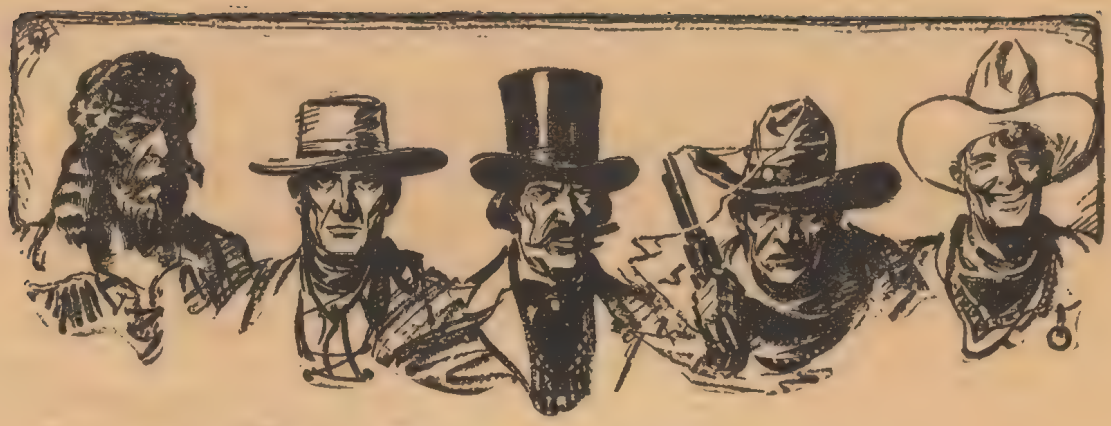
Jay glanced around. There was a big steel safe in the room, and its door stood open. A few packets of yellowbacked bills lay on the table along with a tally book and ranch ledgers.

"Turn your back an' unbuckle your gun, Con," he said. "You too, Luke. Go over an' rub noses ag'in a wall. Don't look over your shoulders or move."

Slowly they obeyed, marching to face the blank wall. They carefully dropped their gunbelts on the floor.

"How much money have you got in that safe, Con?" Jay asked. "Don't lie, for I aim to check up on you later."

(Continued on page 126)



IN THE SADDLE

THIS story starts about a year ago, in some smoky hotel room in a Western city—perhaps El Paso or Seattle, a comfortable ranch home in Wyoming or any of a dozen other places where men who know the West may gather for good talk, a friendly drink or two, and live over the glory days when the history of the frontier was in the making.

That was what the boss of this magazine told us, when he came back here, tugging a fat brief-case, from a Western vacation that took him almost ten thousand miles in a month. But this was no sitting-under-a-shade-tree-and-fishing kind of vacation. It was better than that—more fun, and more productive. For he spent his time with people who read this magazine; with the folks who sell it—but talked mostly with the friendly, skillful gents who write for it.

"We've been working on an issue we're going to put out just about a year from now," the boss grinned. "A special anniversary issue, marking our seventh birthday. Walt Coburn, Cliff Farrell, Harry Olmsted—to name but three authors—have promised us something sort of extra in the way of stories for it, too. Now, here's the dope, and it isn't a minute too early for us all to get to work on it. . . ."

As the copy date for the January issue approached, more midnight oil began to light the office. Telegrams burned up the wires, long distance telephone conferences with other authors were held almost daily. Some of the writing men flew on to New York for conference; sometimes the process was reversed, and we hustled out to the airport, feeling something like a streamlined version of a Pony Express messenger ourselves—and never mind any personal cracks about a reducing diet!

At last the issue started to take form; stories started rolling in. And no bunch of kids sneaking down in the chill dawn of a Christmas morning were ever more tickled than we were when we ripped open the bulky envelopes and started reading the typed pages they held.

It seems to us now, as it did then, that the authors did themselves proud, for those stories caught and held our interest from paragraph one, page one. To us, they shoved the clock back to the days when the boundaries of the frontier were laid out in blood and gunsmoke—and held by the breed of iron-hard, two-fisted men who have all but disappeared. . . .

A hostile land may be won and held only so far as its lines of communication —roads and mail or telegraph routes—keep open. That was especially true of the

A word to the wise: Be sure to reserve your copy of the 7th Anniversary Issue today! On sale December 1st at your nearest newsstand!

West during its great dramatic period of development and conflict. And though the dream of the Pony Express was destined to last but a few brief, troubled months, it made a mark on the scheme of Westward expansion that can never be eclipsed in the saga of sheer individual man-courage.

The picture of a lean, determined youngster already waiting on his saddled pony, ready to snatch the filled *mochilas* from a dust-covered, exhausted and blood-stained rider is hard to forget. The story of the messenger who must take his chances against nature at its wildest, and red or white savages who are fighting desperately to wipe him out, is a saga which never grows old—a tale of man-to-man courage and deadly conflict which called for the best in mind, muscle and heart any man can give.

Walt Coburn, born and bred in the land which, not so long ago, was the gun-smoke frontier, not only knows intimately the survivors of that heroic epoch, but also knows how to tell their story in its great, sweeping human drama. He gives us, in the Anniversary Issue—dated January — one of those epic novels which brings that stirring time back to life.

It's a powerful story of Tex Kinkaid, typical of the cold-eyed men who fought to make the frontier safe for the Pony Express. Tex had as little use for U.S. troopers as they did for him, for to Kinkaid this tough-handed job of frontier fighting was the work for those who didn't sit around and wait for orders, but played their desperate game with knowledge of the country and its people, red or white, as their trump cards.

It was small wonder, then, that he was destined to tangle with Dick Sand, for that greenhorn trooper rescued from a Shoshone squaw camp a white girl, adopted by the Indians after a wagon-train

(Continued on page 122)

TRAIN FOR
A GOOD PAY JOB IN
ELECTRICITY
ON REAL MOTORS, GENERATORS, ETC.

12 WEEKS'
"Learn by Doing" Training
Right Here in Coyne Shops

I'LL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING

Send coupon now and I'll tell you all about my quick, easy way to train for your start for a better job and a real future in the giant field of ELECTRICITY. I'll not only tell you about my training but I'll tell you how you can get this training without laying out a lot of money. You can get training first by making a small down payment — then start paying for most of it in easy monthly payments starting 60 days after your regular training period is over. My training — plus my unusual offer — is your chance to get started towards a real job and a real future. Don't dream about better pay and a good job — prepare now to get it.

QUICKER, EASIER WAY

Here in my big COYNE Chicago training shops you are trained on real electrical machinery and equipment—not by correspondence or embarrassing reciting but by actual Practical work. First you are told how to do a thing—Then you are shown how to do it—Then you do the work yourself under the guidance of expert instructors. By my method of instruction you don't need previous experience or advanced education.

PART TIME WORK WHILE TRAINING
EMPLOYMENT SERVICE AFTER GRADUATION

If you are short of money and need part-time work to help pay for your room and board while training, our Employment Department will help you get a part time job. After graduation, we will give you FREE Lifetime Employment Service.

GET THE FACTS

Don't let lack of money keep you from sending the Coupon NOW. My Big FREE COYNE Book is full of facts and photographs which tell you about COYNE Practical Training and how you can get this training first, and pay for it later. It shows you how easy it is to learn by the COYNE method. It will also tell you about my part time work plan—about my graduate employment service, lifetime membership privileges and many other facts you will want to know. Don't delay—mail coupon TODAY.

Training in DIESEL, Electric Refrigeration and Air Conditioning-NO EXTRA COST

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY

H. C. LEWIS, President, COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina St. Dept. 99-76 Chicago, Ill.
Please send me your Big Free Book and details of your "Pay Tuition After Graduation Plan" and other plans to help a fellow get ahead.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

Flush Poisons From Kidneys and Stop Getting Up Nights

Be Healthier, Happier — Live Longer

When you can get for 35 cents a safe, efficient and harmless stimulant and diuretic that should flush from your kidneys the waste matter, poisons and acid that are now doing you harm, why continue to break your restful sleep by getting up through the night?

Don't be an EASY MARK and accept a substitute—Ask for Gold Medal Haarlem Oil Capsules — right from Haarlem in Holland. GET GOLD MEDAL—the original—the genuine. Look for the Gold Medal on the box—35 cents.

Other symptoms of weak kidneys and irritated bladder may be backache, puffy eyes, shifting pains, burning or scanty passage.

FALSE TEETH

LOWEST PRICES

90 DAYS' TRIAL

If you need teeth, but do not care to spend much money, MY METHOD IS WHAT YOU WANT. You MUST be 100% SATISFIED or your money will be refunded anytime within your 90 days trial. I have thousands of Satisfied Customers in United States and foreign countries. MY SPECIAL METHOD IS FOUNDED ON 30 YEARS' EXPERIENCE.

SEND NO MONEY

WRITE TODAY for FREE BOOKLET and MATERIAL.

DR. CLEVELAND DENTAL LABORATORY

Dept. 48-T9, 503-05 Missouri Ave. East St. Louis, Ill.

ASTHMA

Treatment mailed on FREE TRIAL. If satisfied, send $1; if not, it's Free. Write for treatment today.

W. K. STERLINE, 610 Ohio Ave., SIDNEY, OHIO

WILL YOU WEAR THIS SUIT and Make up to $12 in a Day!

Let me send you a fine all-wool union tailored suit FREE OF ONE PENNY COST. Just follow my easy plan and show the suit to your friends. Make up to $12 in a day easily. No experience — no house-to-house canvassing necessary.

Send for Samples—FREE OF COST

Write today for FREE details, ACTUAL SAMPLES and "sure-fire" money-getting plans. Send no money.

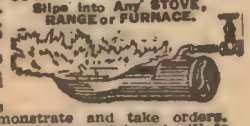
H. J. Collin, PROGRESS TAILORING CO., Dept. A-466 500 South Throop Street, Chicago, Illinois.

NEW TYPE CHEAP OIL BURNER

WHY COOK OR HEAT With COAL or WOOD

Quick heat at turn of valve—hotter, no dirt, ashes or drudgery. Burns cheap oil new way—no clogging up.

Slips into Any STOVE, RANGE or FURNACE.



SENT ON TRIAL Prove its efficiency, convenience, and economical operation. Write for **FREE BURNER** Offer to agents who will demonstrate and take orders. Wonderful money-maker. Write quick—a postal card will do.

UNITED FACTORIES, P-762 Factory Building, Kansas City, Mo.

ITCH

STOPPED QUICKLY

Use D.D.D. Prescription

Quick relief from itching of eczema, rashes and other externally caused skin troubles

35c bottle, at druggists, proves it or money back

(Continued from page 121)

massacre years before. Lieutenant Sand took her to the little Pony Express station on the eve of her Indian marriage, when her faster-father, wise, old Chief Eyes in the Water, had sold her to the chief of the warlike Piutes. Her rescue meant hell would break out on the Pony Trails.

Perhaps it was natural that the lieutenant should fall in love with the girl he had rescued. But war smokes were rising steadily from the mountains above the adobe relay station where the old station-keeper, a young Pony Express rider, and a handful of troopers were forted up in the stockade.

Betsy Lane, the girl who had spent most of her sixteen years in an Indian squaw camp, alone read the dread message of those smokes. It meant, she knew, massacre for those few frontiersmen—unless the messenger, who had left hours before, had gotten through to Fort Churchill.

"Give me pony," she told Lieutenant Sand in her halting English. "I go back to Shoshones. I marry Paiute chief. I tell them, and they don't hurt you. Not ever. I am not afraid. . . ."

The young lieutenant, a year out of West Point, smiled and took both her browned, calloused hands in his own.

"So long as there's a man left here alive to fight, Betsy," he said quietly, "you'll stay here. More soldiers will be here by dawn from Fort Churchill. We'll run off the Indians—and then I'm taking you back with me to the fort. We'll get married, and—"

He broke off at sight of a riderless horse, trotting toward the stockade. Old Sarge swung open the heavy gate. There was blood smeared on the horse's mane, and bloody hand-prints on its rump. Tied to the mane was the webbed canvas cartridge belt of the messenger scout, its loops and holster empty. . . .

Thus had Buffalo Shield, Paiute chief disappointed bridegroom, sent back the grim news that the messenger had never lived to take the news of the hopelessly desperate plight of the frontier folk who waited there for Death.

Old Sarge, whose club-foot had kept him from joining the cavalry he had always loved, limped forward. He told the young lieutenant that this was the chance

for which he'd waited a lifetime—his last chance to bid for glory, to have his name written on Army records with "Killed in performance of a brave and soldierly duty," written after it.

"Don't cheat me out of this, Lieutenant," the old timer begged in his cracked, choked voice.

The officer shook his head. "Wait, Sarge," he said.

Wait for what? Wait for a miracle from heaven? Wait for the skies to fall and curse those Paiutes whose war-drums were making the night hideous out there beyond the stockade as they waited to attack at dawn? It was midnight now, and dawn came at four in the morning. Fort Churchill was forty miles away. . . .

All this the Paiutes had reckoned on, for they had not sent the dead scout's horse with its grim and silent message until too late for another man to get through.

The warriors danced. The drums pounded their rhythm of death for white men. And the grisly, blood-chilling chant of the war-songs drifted down wind to the trapped and beseiged occupants of the little relay station.

"There's no use in any man throwin' away his life to try to get through," a grizzled cavalryman muttered. "We'll make a stand, an' we need everyone who knows how to aim a gun. I been in tougher spots than this, an' lived to tell about it in the canteen." The tough cavalryman lied like the trooper he was.

Even the green shavetail lieutenant knew he was lying. He grinned, showing Betsy how to make coffee. Somehow she understood that these men were willing to sacrifice their lives because of her. They were soldiers—right from the West Point yearling to the seasoned frontier troopers who fought for Uncle Sam for fifteen dollars a month, grub, blankets and a uniform. Old Sarge, who never had joined up, clung to his beloved battered bugle. Men, all of them. U.S. Cavalrymen!

It was old Sarge who first noticed that beat of war-drums had stopped.

"Somethin's goin' to happen, men. Stand ready. Lieutenant, I reckon they're not waitin' till daybreak to attack!"

Sarge limped then on his misshapen

(Continued on page 124)

AUDELS Carpenters and Builders Guides 4 vols. $6

Inside Trade Information for Carpenters, Builders, Joiners, Building Mechanics and all Woodworkers. These Guides give you the short-cut instructions that you want—including new methods, ideas, solutions, plans, systems and money saving suggestions. An easy progressive course for the apprentice and student. A practical daily helper and Quick Reference for the master worker. Carpenters everywhere are using these Guides as a Helping Hand to Easier Work, Better Work and Better Pay. To get this assistance for yourself, simply fill in and mail the FREE COUPON below.

Inside Trade Information On:

How to use the steel square—How to file and set saws—How to build furniture—How to use a mitre box—How to use the chalk line—How to use rules and scales—How to make joints—Carpenters arithmetic—Solving mensuration problems—Estimating strength of timbers—How to set girders and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square—How to build hoists and scaffolds—skylights—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to hang doors—How to lath—lay floors—How to paint

THEO. AUDEL & CO., 49 W. 23rd St., New York City

Mail Audels Carpenters and Builders Guides, 4 vols., on 7 days' free trial. If O.K. I will remit $1 in 7 days, and $1 monthly until $6 is paid. Otherwise I will return them. No obligation unless I am satisfied.

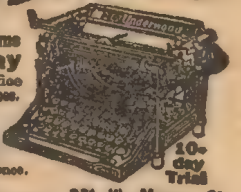
Name.....

Address.....

Occupation.....

Reference.....M.G.

TYPEWRITER ½ Price



Easy Terms
Only 10c a Day

Save over ½ on all standard office models. Also portables at reduced prices.

SEND NO MONEY

All late models completely refinished like brand new. FULLY GUARANTEED. Big free catalog shows actual machines in full colors. Lowest prices. Send at once.

Free course in typing included.

10-day Trial

International Typewriter Exch., 231 W. Monroe St., Dept. 1239, Chicago

High School Course at Home Many Finish In 2 Years

Prepare for College or promotion in Business and Industry. Credit for High School subjects already completed. Diploma awarded.

COLLEGE. If you are a H. S. Graduate, we can give you by home study college-grade vocational training in the important branches of Business and Industry and Liberal Arts. Free Bulletin.

American School, H-949, Drexel at 58th, Chicago

ARREST HIM, OFFICER!

I'LL HAVE COMPLETE FACTS ON THE OTHER FELLOW TONIGHT!

Secret Service Operator No. 38 is on the job . . . FOLLOW HIM through all the excitement of his chase after the counterfeit gang. Write NOW for

FREE Confidential Reports

No. 38 Made to His Chief!

It may open your eyes to the great opportunity for YOU as a well paid Finger Print Expert. The kind of work you'd like. Excitement! Travel! Thrills! A REGULAR MONTHLY salary. REWARD MONEY. Graduates of this school HEAD 47% of all Identification Bureaus in U. S.! Write for Free Reports, Finger Print Book, low prices, Easy Terms Offer.

Literature will be sent only to persons stating their age.

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7389 Chicago, Illinois

Ankles Swollen, Backache, Nervous, Kidneys Strained?

If you're feeling out o' sorts, Get Up Nights, or suffer from Dizziness, Nervousness, Backache, Leg Pains, Swollen Ankles, Burning Passages, Excess Acidity, or Loss of Energy and feel old before your time, non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles may be the true cause.

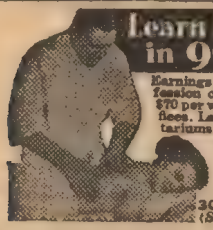
Wrong foods and drinks, worry, colds or overwork may create an excess of acids and place a heavy strain on your kidneys so that they function poorly and need help to properly purify your blood and maintain health and energy.

Help Kidneys Doctor's Way

Many Doctors have discovered by scientific clinical tests and in actual practice that in many cases the best way to help the Kidneys clean out excess poisons and acids is with a scientifically prepared prescription called Cystex. Hundreds and hundreds of Doctors' records prove this. All Cystex active ingredients are listed on each package.

Money Back Guarantee

Often the very first dose of Cystex goes right to work helping your Kidneys flush out Excess Acids. This action plus the palliative work of Cystex in many non-organic and non-systemic cases of Kidney and Bladder troubles may easily make you feel like a new person in just a few days. Try Cystex under the guarantee of money back on return of empty package unless completely satisfied. Cystex (Siss-tex) costs only 3c a dose at druggists and the guarantee protects you so start your test today.



Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

Earnings of Men and Women in the fascinating profession of Swedish Massage run as high as $40 to $70 per week but many prefer to open their own offices. Large incomes from Doctors, hospitals, sanitariums and private patients come to those who qualify through our training. Reducing alone offers rich rewards for specialist. Write for Anatomy Charts and booklet—They're FREE.

The College of Swedish Massage
30 E. Adams St., Dept. 995, Chicago
(Successor to National College of Massage)

SUCCESS AND HAPPINESS ARE YOURS!

VARUNA • • ASTRO-ANALYST

35-Page Course Dealing with Love, Marriage & Success, mailed with Your FREE Horoscope. Send Birth Date, Month & Year with only $1.00 to P.O. Box 585b, Seattle, Wash. FOR THIS, YOUR PERSONAL GUIDE.

NEURITIS Relieve Pain in Few Minutes *or Money Back*

To relieve the torturing pain of Neuritis, Rheumatism, Neuralgia or Lumbago in a few minutes, get NURITO, the fine formula, used by thousands. No opiates. Does the work quickly—must relieve cruel pain to your satisfaction in a few minutes—or your money back. Don't suffer. Don't delay. Ask your druggist today for trustworthy NURITO on this guarantee.

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

The Trademark of BETTER Magazines

—on newsstands everywhere!

FOR THE BEST IN FICTION
—INSIST ON A MAGAZINE
WITH THE *POPULAR* SEAL

POPULAR PUBLICATIONS, Inc.
205 East 42nd Street New York City

FALSE TEETH

FIRM-FIT Dental Plates
Made In Our Own Laboratory!
NOW AS LOW AS $6.75

$6.75 per plate. Should fit perfectly. Workmanship and material **GUARANTEED.** Plates made from your personal impression, look beautiful. **TRY PLATES 60 DAYS,** if not delighted with fit and YOUR IMPROVED APPEARANCE we GUARANTEE return of full purchase price.

60 DAYS TRIAL

SEND NO MONEY—Rush postcard for **FREE** Impression material and catalog of LOW PRICES. Do it right now!

SUPERVISED BY A DENTIST
FERRIS-GRIGSBY DENTAL LABORATORY, INC.
Dept. 642, 6217 S. Halsted St., CHICAGO, ILL.

(Continued from page 123)

foot to the end of the stockade. The notes of his bugle sounded clear and brave—yet somehow pathetic—in the first notes of the Star Spangled Banner. And the eyes of all of them, tough, hard men—fighters, who had killed and seen men die in that rough land, were a little blurred as they looked at that brave, crippled figure, standing alone, sending out the notes which were half prayer, half battle-cry.

The bugle's last notes were still echoing when a lone horseman rode at a long lope toward the stockade. A man's voice came from outside the high adobe walls.

It was Tex Kinkaid. He rode in, a half-smoked cigarette between his thin lips. They stared at him, unbelieving.

"Rest your guns, soldiers," he drawled, biting mockery in his slurred voice. "The Injun scare's over, and the Paiutes are on the way back to the hills. I rode here to claim my bride. I bought her about an hour ago from Eyes in the Water for a hundred head of horses. My word's been given to that Shoshone medicine man that I'd marry her. And no man can say that Tex Kinkaid ever welched!"

There was a faint, mocking smile twisting his thin mouth, as he dismounted and hitched up his gun-belts. "Eyes in the Water and some of his old warriors will be here tomorrow for the weddin'."

"Who the hell are you, anyhow, Kinkaid?" Lieutenant Sand's voice was sharp, his blue eyes blazing. "What breed of white man do you think you are? This girl is no flea-bitten squaw! You're buying her from a damned Indian like you'd trade for a horse!"

Tex Kinkaid's voice cut through the stunned dawn silence. "It was a fair swap,

soldier. I threw in a couple of kegs of rot-gut whiskey to soothe the feelin's of Chief Buffalo Shield. He likes his likker. And I got the best of the dicker, at that. I stole the horses from fellers I didn't like. The Injun whiskey cost me nothin'. I located the booze cache of a couple of whiskey-peddlers. . . . "

Lieutenant Sand was tall, and built like a trained athlete. There was a hundred and eight-five pounds of bone and muscle behind the hard left hook that caught Tex Kinkaid on the jaw, and the blow came without warning. . . .

That blow, however, was to prove one of the most expensive that Dick Sand ever launched. For it was to start an undying enmity between two game fighting men, who would hate each other as long as they lived. They shared the same capacity for sheer red-blooded courage, yet were as different in background and temperament as any two people who were brought to grips by the rough-and-ready frontier. And through all their powerful story runs the saga of the Pony Express and the kid called Possum, Pony Express rider, who had to outwit death so that the mail could go through!

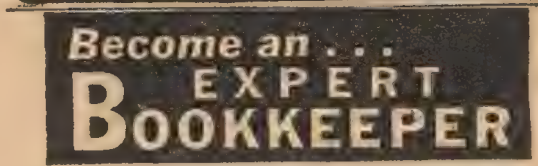
We believe that this novel, with all the wide scope, the colorful background and tense actionful drama that was an intrinsic part of the frontier is a fitting story to lead off our Seventh Anniversary Issue. We've called it "War Smoke Guides the Westward Mails"—and we think it lives up to all the thrilling implications of its name.

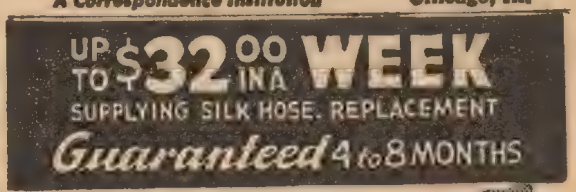
Yet, there's another novel in the issue, too—a tale of the times when Death rode all the way with hell's own trail-herd in its epic drive to end-of-steel. Cliff Farrell tells of that perilous, murderous cattle-drive in "The Long Red Miles to Dodge."

Those two hard-hitting stories, plus novelettes, among which is Harry F. Olmsted's "Gun-Wolf on the Pay-Roll," are added to strong short stories that bring back all the thrill and man-conflict of the open range and roaring boom-camps.

This birthday cake of frontier fiction will be served up on December 1st. The story-chefs have been busy at it for a year, and already you've had a taste. We're fixing to slice it pronto—and the date is December 1st!

Your HAIR
IS IT THINNING OR FALLING OUT?
If your hair is causing you this kind of trouble and it is due to poor blood circulation in the scalp, rent a Crosley XERVAC and try home treatments with this amazing machine. It is designed to help correct just such conditions of the scalp as the lack of proper blood circulation.
Rent a CROSLEY XERVAC
Write for free particulars, how you can rent a brand new machine, the same type now used in many barber shops and scalp clinics, for a small rental fee per month, without any obligation to buy. The Crosley XERVAC operates on the principle of alternate vacuum and pressure, known to be effective for forcing fresh, stimulating blood into the deep-rooted blood vessels. Very compact, easy to use. Now that you can rent one you can get its benefits on easiest of terms. Write today for details of this new home rental plan.
THE CROSLEY CORPORATION
Dept. L-80 Cincinnati, Ohio


Become an . . .
EXPERT
BOOKKEEPER
Bookkeeping offers many jobs — opens way to even better opportunities. *New method* — expert, modern, inexpensive. *Practical job method* — you learn quickly, easily, by doing. No experience necessary — we train from ground up. You study at home, in spare time. Write for full information and special terms.
LaSalle Extension University
A Correspondence Institution
Dept. 12334-H
Chicago, Ill.



WEAR HOSE WE FURNISH
without cost and start cash earnings quickly. Everybody buys hose. Guaranteed to wear from 4 to 8 months (depending on number of pairs) without holes, snags or runs or REPLACED FREE. Big repeat sales. Doris Jensen of Illinois reports earnings of $11.00 in 5½ hours. Received 2 new cars as bonuses. Charles Mills of Minn., earned $120 in one week and received 2 new cars, as extra bonuses. Extra hosiery for your personal use sent with outfit, no extra cost—send size, no money. Rush name on penny postal for sample outfit, details. ACT NOW!
WILKNIT HOSIERY CO.
Midway-S-15,
Greenfield, Ohio
Miss White
Universal Star

QUICK CASH
IN NEW POTATO CHIPS
START AT HOME
Here's your chance—a money-making business of your own. Turn potatoes into cash by making new kind of Potato Chips with my improved outfit. Makes delicious, superior, "NON-GREASY" Chips at low cost. A few hours practice does it. Begin anywhere—city, village, town. Potatoes cheap and plentiful. Wholesale or retail. Steady year 'round business. Groceries, markets, restaurants, taverns do the retailing for you.
WE HELP START YOU IN BUSINESS
Great quantities of Chips are eaten daily. Profit large—unusually so. You can start this money-making business on a "next to nothing" outlay of cash. Write for Potato Chip Booklet.
LONG-EAKINS Company
1235-S High St., Springfield, Ohio

(Continued from page 119)

Con Gilbert hesitated. "Almost twenty—twenty thousand dollars," he admitted sullenly.

Jay whistled. "Far better than I figured," he said. "I'll give you a receipt for it."

"Receipt?" Gilbert questioned in a hollow voice.

"Sure. As part payment for two thousand head of stock you an' Luke stole from the McQueens an' Bassiters. We'll collect the remainder later. I'm takin' this dinero tonight to make sure you don't skip the country with it. Go over to the safe, Con, an' dig out every cent you've got cached there."

Con Gilbert hesitated, and then walked to the safe. He glanced up once, and Jay saw the strangely hot light deep in his eyes. Then he bent over the safe, reaching in.

Suddenly he whirled. Jay caught the glitter of the gun in his hand which Con had taken from the safe, and he twisted aside. The crash of Con's shot echoed in the room. The slug raked Jay's ribs like the touch of a branding iron. He fired instinctively in reply, then fired again.

Con Gilbert staggered as two slugs tore through his chest. His gun, also, exploded a second time, but the bullet went into the ceiling. He began to fall. . . .

Jay whirled. Big Luke McQueen was snatching up the six-shooter he had discarded. The gun bellowed, and the bullet burying itself in the wall an inch from Jay's shoulder. Jay thumbed the hammer. In that roaring instant, with his life at stake, he shot to kill, but luck saved Big Luke.

Jay's bullet struck the blue-barreled six-shooter in the big man's hand, tearing it from his grasp. Big Luke expected to be cut down as he stood there unarmed, and in desperation he came lunging across the room, snarling like a wild animal at bay.

JAY slashed at Big Luke with his gun barrel hoping to fell the frenzied man, but Big Luke swung an arm and knocked the gun flying out of Jay's fingers.

They locked then in hand to hand conflict. Jay felt the inspired strength of the berserk man as they clenched. A fist crashed against his head with stunning impact. He was driven back to the wall, and Big Luke's thick fingers were clawing at his throat.

Volcanic rage arose in Jay. He tore free of the clutching fingers, smashed the big man twice in the mouth with knuckles that crushed flesh and splintered teeth. Big Luke rocked back on his heels and Jay measured him and knocked him over the center table with a crash.

Big Luke's bulk rolled over, he uttered a long, moaning sigh, and lay limp on the floor.

Kit came hopping to Jay's side. She looked at Con Gilbert who lay sprawled in front of the safe, then looked away swiftly. Con Gilbert was dead.

Jay stood a moment listening at the storm battering the house with screaming fury. Because the bunkhouse was more than a hundred yards away and to windward, the riding crew had not heard the shooting in the ranch house.

Jay handed the six-shooter to the girl. He brought an empty floursack from the kitchen. Stepping over Con Gilbert's body he cleaned out the safe of money. Counting it carefully into a sack, he righted the table, tore a blank page from a tally book, and wrote a receipt.

"Received from Con Gilbert," he repeated for Kit's benefit. "Nineteen thousand four hundred and eighty dollars as part payment for two thousand head of prime cattle delivered in mixed brands over a period of three years. Additional payment due and payable from date of delivery."

"I'm signin' it with the names of Jay

Bassiter an' Kit McQueen, as agents for the sellers," he added. "I'll leave this receipt in Con Gilbert's pocket. Do you want to sign it with your own hand?"

"Yes," she said, hopping forward. "But I'll use my real name—Kit McQueen Bassiter!"

He looked at her with a slow grin coming over his battered face. Then, suddenly he uttered a sharp exclamation.

"What is it?" asked Kit McQueen. But as her eyes followed Jay's gaze, the color went out of her face.

"Big Luke's gone!" Jay said tersely. "And that means that he'll bring the bunkhouse crew down on us. He must have crawled like an Injun—" He broke off, running toward the rear, but was back in a moment, shame-faced. "I should have hog-tied him," he said. "Kit, we've got to get out of here—fast. We'll leave by the way we came. There's a horse shed near the corral. We've got to ride the blizzard again, but there's an easier trail down-range, and the storm's lost it's first push."

MUFFLED in their weather coats, they stole from the rear door as men came spilling from the bunkhouse in response to Big Luke's shout. The storm shielded them as they circled to the shelter shed. There Jay frenziedly helped himself to saddles from the line, and rigged two shaggy sorrels which he selected by match flare.

He swung the girl onto a horse. Shots flashed through the driving snow as they lashed the reluctant horses out of the shed, and a bullet glanced from Jay's saddle horn with an eerie scream. Then they were away, and swallowed by the blizzard.

They had horses to carry them now, and there was an easy wagon trail to follow down the range. This trail led to Aunt Lettie Hilliard's little homestead on

(Concluded on page 128)

GUARANTEED TIRES!
GOODYEAR·GOODRICH FIRESTONE·U.S. and Other Standard Makes

World's Lowest TIRE PRICES
Tire users by the thousands all over the U.S.A. vouch for the Long Hard Service of our Standard Brand tires reconditioned with high grade materials and latest methods by our tire experts. Our 21 years experience makes it possible to offer tires at lowest prices, with legal agreement to replace at ½ price any tire that fails to give 12 Mos. Service.

FREE! LANTERN With Every 2 Tires ordered

Complete with batteries and newest type reflector bulb. Ready for instant use. Strong, steady light. Useful everywhere. Order now.

EVERY TIRE GUARANTEED!

BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$2.15	$1.05
29x4.50-20	2.35	1.05
30x4.50-21	2.40	1.15
28x4.75-19	2.45	1.25
29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.55
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
6.00-16	3.75	1.45

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$2.35	$0.95	33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
31x4	2.95	1.25	34x4½	3.45	1.45
32x4	2.95	1.25	30x5	3.65	1.65
33x4	2.95	1.25	33x5	3.75	1.75
34x4	3.25	1.35	35x5	3.95	1.75
32x4½	3.35	1.45			

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES
(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95	34x7	$10.95	$4.65
33x5	3.95	1.75	38x7	10.95	4.65
34x5	4.25	2.25	36x8	11.45	4.95
32x6	7.95	2.95	40x8	13.25	4.95
36x6	9.95	4.45			

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65	7.50-20	$6.95	$3.75
6.50-20	4.45	1.95	8.25-20	8.95	4.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95	9.00-20	10.95	5.65
			9.75-20	13.95	6.45

ALL OTHER SIZES — DEALERS WANTED

SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. ($3.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct **5 per cent** if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW—GUARANTEED—

PERRY-FIELD TIRE & RUBBER CO.
2328-30 S. Michigan Av., Dept. 2670-A Chicago, Ill.

World's Smallest Pocket RADIO
WIRELESS TUBELESS BATTERYLESS
MODERN PLASTIC CABINETS

Midget radio fits your pocket or purse. Weighs only 4 ozs. Smaller than cigarette package! Receives stations with natural tone. **NO CRYSTALS** to adjust—**NO UPKEEP**—only one moving part. WIRELESS, TUBELESS, BATTERYLESS! **ENTIRELY NEW PATENTED DESIGN.** Enclosed geared luminous dial for perfect tuning. **OWNERS** report amazing reception and distance.

ONE YEAR GUARANTEE

Complete ready to listen with instruction and Tinyphone for use in homes, offices, hotels, in bed, etc **TAKES ONLY A SECOND TO CONNECT—NO ELECTRICITY NEEDED!**

SEND NO MONEY! Pay postman only $2.99 plus postage on arrival or send $2.99 (Check, M.O., Cash) and yours will be sent postpaid. A most unusual value. **ORDER NOW!**
MIDGET RADIO CO. Dept. PF-12 KEARNEY, NEBR.

FREE BOOK

Yes FREE. Explains Taxidermy. Tells how to learn at home by mail to mount birds, animals, heads . . . to TAN skins and furs. Great for MEN and BOYS. Fun! Also earn money in spare time. WRITE TODAY—NOW—for free book containing 100 game pictures. State AGE.
N.W.School of Taxidermy, Dept. 3369, Omaha, Neb.

don't WORRY

ABOUT **RUPTURE**

Why put up with years of needless discomfort and worry? Try a Brooks Automatic Air Cushion. This marvelous appliance permits the opening to close, yet holds reducible rupture securely, comfortably—day and night. Thousands report amazing results. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads or stiff springs to chafe or gouge. Made for men, women and children. Durable, cheap, **Sent on trial** to prove it. Never sold in stores. Beware of imitations. Write for Free Book on Rupture, no-risk trial order plan, and proof of results. All correspondence confidential.
BROOKS COMPANY, 458-F State St., Marshall, Mich.

Classified Advertising

Agents Wanted

Wear fine hose I send without cost with outfit while taking orders for amazing new hosiery. Replacement guaranteed against holes, snags and runs. Rush name and hose size. Wilknit, Desk S-15, Greenfield, Ohio.

Antiques For Sale

Indian Relics, Coins, Curios, Catalog 5c. INDIAN MUSEUM, NORTHBRANCH, KANSAS.

Aviation

AVIATION APPRENTICES — Training for entering Aviation as Apprentices. Write immediately enclosing stamp. Mechanix Universal Aviation Service. Wayne County Airport, Dept. U21, Detroit, Michigan.

Correspondence Courses

Correspondence courses and educational books, slightly used. Sold. Rented. Exchanged. All subjects. Satisfaction guaranteed. Cash paid for used courses. Complete details and bargain catalog FREE. Send name. NELSON COMPANY, M-218 Manhattan Building, Chicago.

Slightly soiled CHEMISTRY COURSE $10.00. Particulars. LEUMAS, 128 East 23rd, New York.

Educational & Instruction

FOREST JOBS AVAILABLE $125-$175 MONTH. Cabin, hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify immediately. Write Rayson Service, C-62, Denver, Colo.

MEN—WOMEN. GET U. S. GOVERNMENT JOBS. $105-$175 month. Prepare now for next examinations. Particulars free. Franklin Institute, Dept. S31, Rochester, N. Y.

Male and Female Help Wanted

M. M. earned $267, three weeks, raising mushrooms in cellar! Exceptional, but your cellar, shed perhaps suitable. We buy crops. Book free. United, 3848 Lincoln Ave., Dept. 551, Chicago.

Old Money Wanted

PREMIUMS PAID for Gold, Silver, Copper Coins. Send dime for booklet. A. French, Route 1, Troy, N. Y.

Patents

INVENTORS—WRITE FOR NEW FREE BOOK—"Patent Guide for the Inventor" and "Record of Invention" form. No charge for preliminary information. Clarence A. O'Brien and Hyman Berman, Registered Patent Attorneys, 16-S Adams Building, Washington, D. C.

Photo Finishing

ROLLS DEVELOPED—25c coin. Two 5 x 7 Double Weight Professional Enlargements, 8 gloss prints. CLUB PHOTO SERVICE, Dept. 16, La Crosse, Wis.

ROLL DEVELOPED, 16 guaranteed prints, 25c. SMART PHOTO, Winona, Minnesota.

Poems—Songwriters

Songwriters. Interesting Proposition. Write: PARAMOUNT SONG-RECORDING STUDIO, L-40, Box 190, Hollywood, Calif.

SONGWRITERS: Send your poem today for immediate consideration. RICHARD BROTHERS, 30 Woods Building, Chicago.

SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC. Free examination. Send poems to McNeil, Master of Music, 510-A So. Alexandria, Los Angeles, Calif.

ORIGINAL POEMS, SONGS WANTED for publication, radio. WESTMORE MUSIC CORPORATION, Dept. 32E, Portland, Oregon.

WANTED—Poems for musical setting. Submit for consideration. Phonograph transcriptions made. Keenan's Studio, PP, Box 2140, Bridgeport, Conn.

(Concluded from page 127)

the Pronghorn River half a dozen miles away. . . .

It was midnight when they pulled up in the lee of the house. Aunt Lettie, wrapped in a flowery flannel dressing-gown admitted them. She stared in wonder, and her faded eyes opened wider as she heard the clink of gold money in the floursack Jay dropped wearily on the floor.

"Payment for beef that the Bassiters an McQueens never collected on in the past," Jay said tersely. "Sold to a dead man."

Aunt Lettie's eyes were wide behind her shining spectacles. "Sold—to a dead man?" she repeated wonderingly. "Jay Bassiter whatever do you mean? I never see such goin's-on for a bride an' groom!"

And while the kindly woman put on the big blackened coffee pot, Jay and Kit both told her the story of their night's adventures, and of Con Gilbert's attempt to bring destruction and death to the Hat Peak range.

Aunt Lettie marveled, staring at them as though she still couldn't believe it. "I declare, if this house ain't gettin' to be a regular nestin' place fer turtle doves. Sherm Bassiter an' Honey McQueen got married in this very parlor this afternoon, an' I didn't even have time to git dressed proper for the weddin', they was in that much of a hurry. It seems they had a fallin' out, but they fixed it up an'. . . ."

Kit looked at Jay and began to laugh hysterically. "The old feud is buried twice over," she said wildly. "But don't ever let anyone tell you, Aunt Lettie, that it wasn't *my* husband who did more than any other man to bring peace to this range!"

"Maybe more than any other man," Jay said, drawing her into his arms. "But I had considerable help from a red-headed little hell-cat!"

THE END

BOY_IT'S GREAT TO FEEL LIKE THIS!

DO YOU "feel like a million bucks"? Does your body tingle with glorious glad-to-be-alive zip, tireless energy—smashing strength and driving power surging through every muscle and sinew?

It's GREAT to feel like THAT! And it's great to have—BEHIND IT—a muscular, perfectly-developed body that others envy and admire. There's a personal magnetism that it seems to "send out" too! It *draws* people to you—wins friends—better jobs—respect. It's hard to beat a man—*in anything*—when he FEELS in the PINK OF CONDITION. And when he has a build which broadcasts that fact to *everyone!*

Charles Atlas

Untouched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner of title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

Let Me Prove I Can Make YOU a New Man . . . of Might, Muscle, and Energy

Will you give me a chance to prove I can help you build the strong, evenly-developed body you always wanted. A big, husky chest. A powerful back. Biceps like iron. Tireless arms and legs. A stomach ridged with bands of muscle. A general condition that increases the fun of living.

I know what it means to have a body people pity! I was once a 97 lb. weakling! Self-conscious. Embarrassed. Ashamed to strip for sports or swim. Only HALF-ALIVE!

Then I discovered *"Dynamic Tension."* It turned me into twice winner of the title, *"World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."* And now I'd like to prove that my system can make a NEW MAN of YOU!

7-Day Trial Offer

I don't say I can do all this for you in 7 days! But I DO say—and want to *prove*—that I can show you enough results in even THAT short time to convince you that *"Dynamic Tension"* can (right in your home) give you the body you always wanted!

Are you underweight? Let me show you how to add pounds where needed! Are you fat in spots? Put it up to me to pare you down to fighting trim. The purpose of *"Dynamic Tension"* is simple. It is a natural way developed by me—to distribute added pounds of powerful muscle—to get rid of surplus fat—to give you the strength and build that will win everyone's envy, respect. And for those with systems sluggish from lack of exercise—to help them tone up their entire body, inside and out.

Silver Cup Being Given Away

This cup, 14" high, on a mahogany base, will be awarded to pupil who makes greatest physical improvement in the next 3 months

48-Page Book FREE

It tells about *"Dynamic Tension,"* how it has made big-muscled men of others; shows, by actual photos, how I have developed pupils to perfectly balanced proportions.

If not satisfied with your present development — if you want to know more about *"Dynamic Tension"* and what I want to prove it can do for *your* body, get my free book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* Mail coupon or postcard today. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83M, 115 E. 23 St., New York, N. Y.

FREE BOOK

This book tells about my 7 DAY TRIAL OFFER. Mail coupon TODAY! No obligation.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83M,
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of **Dynamic Tension** will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength" and full details about your 7-DAY Trial Offer.

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....

WITNESSED STATEMENT SERIES:

"Finest Tobacco in 300 Years"

"Uncle Sam's new methods helped make it better than ever...and Luckies always buy the 'Cream'," says Larry Moore, independent tobacco buyer.

Here's what Larry Moore recently told a visitor to Tobaccoland:

VISITOR: "Why have crops in recent years been so good?"

MR. MOORE: "Because farmers have adopted new methods... developed by the U. S. Gov't!"

VISITOR: "Do Luckies get a good grade of these improved crops?"

MR. M.: "Yes, sir—Luckies always *did* choose the choicer grades. That's what started me smoking them 21 years ago!"

VISITOR: "Do other tobacco experts prefer Luckies, too?"

MR. M.: "Among those I know, Luckies are the 2 to 1 favorite!"

VISITOR: "Looks to me as if I'd better try Luckies!"

Yes, the tobacco in Luckies is better than ever. And Luckies are easy on the throat because of the famous "Toasting" process. *Try* Luckies for one week. Then you'll know why...**WITH MEN WHO KNOW TOBACCO BEST—IT'S LUCKIES 2 TO 1.**

Easy on Your Throat—
Because "IT'S TOASTED"

Have you tried a Lucky lately?

Copyright 1939, The American Tobacco Company.